UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

QUALITY MATTERS: RETHINKING PARENTAL PARTICIPATION IN EDUCATIONAL GOVERNANCE

by

©

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the nature of parental involvement in educational decision-making in a large urban school district. Addressing the experiences and perceptions of two principals and ten parents at a school located in an inner-city neighborhood and one principal and seven parents situated in a high-income area, the case study method was employed at both school sites. Data was gathered over a four month period at both schools using semi-structured interviews with parents and principals and non-participant observations of the school governance meetings.

With acknowledgement of current educational policy and critical educational research, a significant finding of this study indicates that school council policy is problematic as it appealed specifically to higher income parents rather than serving as an open invitation for all parents to become involved in educational governance. In fact, a substantial difference existed between both research sites with the inner city school adopting a peculiar structure for parental involvement in educational governance. As well, this research highlighted the influential role of the principal in terms of promoting, shaping, and fostering parental involvement.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

Parental involvement in education has commanded considerable attention over the past decade. In fact, substantial research evidence suggests that parental involvement in education has positive effects on children's academic achievement (Epstein & Connors, 1995; Henderson, Berla & Kerewsky, 1989; Ho & Willms, 1996; Reynolds, 1993). These studies indicate that when families participate in their children's education, children are more likely to earn higher grades and receive higher scores on tests, attend school more regularly, complete more homework, demonstrate more positive attitudes and behaviours, and enroll in higher education more than students with less involved families. For these reasons, increasing parental involvement in the education of their children has been considered an important goal by governments, policy makers, administrators and educators.

As a means of involving parents in schools, provincial governments across Canada have developed policies creating a greater role for parents in public education. By the mid 1900s, Departments of Education in all provinces had introduced legislation requiring the formation of school councils. A common theme throughout all jurisdictions was to improve the quality of educational experiences for students through the participation of parents as 'partners' in educational decisions made at the schools. While the composition of school councils recommended by these policies varied somewhat, they typically consisted of the school principal, a teacher, parents, a community representative, and, in the case of high schools, a student was usually required to be involved in the school council.

Generally, the school council role was to assist in the development of school improvement plans, help with formulating or revising school policies, and participate in the school budget priorities.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to describe and interpret the complexities of parents' experiences of involvement in Alberta school councils, and to compare these experiences between two schools located in high income and low income neighborhoods, respectively. Because the school principal is so central to school council formation and activities, the study included parents' relations with the principal in school council-related activity. The main question guiding this inquiry was:

What is the nature of parent-principal participation and relations in two school councils within a large urban school district?

This question was answered from the point of view of parents and principals that served on both school councils. The following sub-questions guided the research:

1. What are the activities and experiences of parents and principals who participate in the school council?

2. What are parents' incentives and expectations in joining the school council?

3. How do dimensions of difference such as gender and the social positioning of families influence their membership and participation and experiences in school councils and related school activities?

To explore these questions, I conducted interviews with both parents and principals at two schools located within a large urban school district. At both sites, parents and principals were involved in educational decision-making. As this research approached the world from the participants' perspectives, the research shifted slightly according to topics emphasized by interviewees. For example, some parents spoke at length about volunteering activities at the schools and the presence of various cliques of parents that attempted to control parental involvement opportunities. While this information extended beyond the original purpose of the study to focus on school councils, it was included since many parent participants deemed it to be important. I also began this study with an interest in studying two "exemplary" educational governance sites and followed the advice of district officials in selecting the research sites. However, as the study progressed, I soon became aware that the term "exemplary" was bound by too many contextual factors to be a meaningful criterion across very different communities.

Background to the Study

Alberta School Councils

The creation of school councils was an important component of the Alberta government's educational reform and restructuring agenda. According to Peters (1999, p.86), in an attempt to make the educational system more efficient and keep spending under control, Alberta premier Ralph Klein embarked upon an educational revolution and made significant changes to educational funding within the province beginning in 1993. For example, between 1993 and 1995 the government reduced the number of school boards from 161 to 43. The government also crippled the power of school boards by eliminating their property taxation powers. Further reductions saw a forty per cent decline in the number of people employed by the ministry of education. Similarly, Taylor (2001) claims that a growing preoccupation with debt and deficits in Alberta during the 1990s led to a crisis in public education. According to the author, "funding cuts gave politicians and bureaucrats the excuse to restructure and implement reforms" (p.88). Within the realm of education, reforms included "centralized provincial control over the collection and allocation of funds, charter school legislation, expanded standardized testing, an increased focus on preparing students to meet the needs of business and energy, and *stronger school council legislation*" (p.3).

Evans (1999) notes that one key initiative of the Alberta government to improve educational accountability involved devolved responsibility. This change placed increasing demands upon the principals giving them control over the school budget and significant responsibility for operational decisions previously assigned to school boards. As well, the government mandated that school councils become part of the educational fabric as each school was required to have one. Not surprisingly, fund-raising efforts at schools increased as a response to the government's funding cuts (Evans, 1999). For example, in 1997, Alberta's public schools raised a total of $124 million dollars through private donations, parent fund-raising efforts, and cafeteria sales to staff and students. Not only had school funding thus devolved onto parents and communities, but significant disparities had resulted from school council fund-raising: Evans claims that the relatively well-off Elk

Island Public School District was able to raise more than ten times as much per student as those in the Peace-Wapiti Public School District in 1997-1998.

Neo-liberal Tendencies

The growing inequities within Alberta education gained increased attention in recent years. For example, Kachur (1999, p.60) asserts that "since the early 1900s, Alberta has embarked on a New Right agenda" witnessing the proliferation of neo-liberalism. Adopted from Margaret Thatcher's reign over Britain during the 1980s, neo-liberalism denoted market-based competition. Kachur outlines several components central to the notion of neo-liberalism: (1) the free market (the idea that the market should be able to make major social and political decisions without restrictions from the government); (2) individualism (eliminate the concept of the public good and pressure the poorest people in a society to find solutions to their lack of health care); and (3) minimal state influence (deregulation and privatization of government owned enterprises, goods and services to private investors).

Critical writers also suggest that these factors may be leading to the deterioration of public education. For example, McLaren (2003) writes that neoliberalism is one of the most dangerous politics that we face since its goal has been to introduce a market philosophy into education: this often has forced schools to compete against each other for pupils to secure adequate funding. Within this framework, the author suggests that "schools were encouraged to provide better value for money and must seek to learn from the entrepreneurial world of business or risk going into receivership" (p.23). Thus, if a school is successful at improving educational performance, it is rewarded by increased popularity and increased student enrollment. On the other hand, if a school is not successful, it risks bankruptcy as a result of not being able to compete successfully for children. Similarly, McClafferty, Torres, and Mitchell (2000) argue that the notions of open markets, the reduction of the public sector, the decrease of state intervention in the economy and the deregulation of markets created educational inequity by shifting power to those who were most capable of exercising that power. For example, they claimed that an increased reliance on market forces in education entrenched a dichotomy between 'winners and losers' as some individuals were in a better position to take part in the competition than others. Lloyd-Bennett (1993) expands upon this form of educational discrimination by claiming that the competition for pupil standards and academic achievement in schools had resulted in the marginalization of difficult pupils or low academic achievers who were classified as 'unsaleable goods'.

Political Context

In 2004, when this study was undertaken, a climate of fiscal restraint characterized the school district where both case studies were conducted. Almost one year before data collection began, teachers within the school district went on strike. Wanting the government to provide additional funding to improve classroom conditions and to raise salaries to a level that addressed the impending teacher shortage, teachers went on strike for a total of 13 school days. Considerable hardships ensued as the government issued a back-to-work order. For example, then-Alberta Teachers' Association President Larry Booi asked Alberta teachers to suspend contacts with, and services provided to, Alberta Learning. He indicated that any further participation in department activities, including the marking of diploma exams, would not proceed. As well, teachers were requested not to partake in volunteer services such as extra-curricular activities at their school.

Forced to accept binding arbitration, school boards were then faced with a government unwilling to pay for the outcome of that arbitration. The increase given to school boards was not enough to cover arbitrated wage settlements or any of the other rising costs, and the result was teachers being laid off. Approximately 1000 teachers were out of work across the Province of Alberta beginning in September 2003 as a result of the government cut-backs (Globe and Mail, October 13, 2003).

Prior to the teachers' strike, in June 2002, Alberta's Commission on Learning consisting of a nine-member panel was appointed by then-Minister of Learning, Dr. Lyle Oberg, to undertake a comprehensive review of Alberta's education system. Charged with the task of making recommendations regarding such things as class size, pupil-to-teacher ratios, hours of instruction, and support of special needs students, the Learning Commission spoke with a variety of education stakeholders and experts, conducted research and consulted with parents, teachers, and other interested Albertans. In total, over 15, 400 Albertans provided input to the Commission by completing and submitting workbooks. As well, more than 300 presentations were made to the Commission during public meetings held at various locations throughout the Province.

Subsequent to the release of the Learning Commission's findings on October 7, 2003, the Alberta Government announced in December 2003 that it supported 84 of the 95 recommendations made by Alberta's Commission on

Learning. Implementation of these findings, however, continued to be a very slow process and my interviews with parents and principals at both schools revealed this frustration. Having felt the brunt of Alberta government's inadequate funding to help improve classroom conditions, provide incentives to attract and retain qualified teachers and offer fair salary increases to all teachers, many parent interviewees expressed a sense of hopelessness and even despair in terms of their children's education at school. Whether frustrated with split classes, angry over a lack of resources, or afraid of sending their children to private schools, participants in this study reflected the effects of a public education system under stress in the face of conflict, worrisome trends, significant challenges and uncertainty.

Significance of the Study

Given the current emphasis being placed on parental involvement in educational governance in Alberta and the political climate through which school councils evolved, this study is significant because it provides an in-depth exploration of parents' actual patterns and experiences of involvement, and their relationships with one another and with the principal in council-related activities. This is useful because considerable parental involvement literature professes a unitary view of parental involvement in educational governance stating that 'school councils' are the recommended medium (Barbour & Barbour, 1997; Creese & Bradley, 1997; Dixon, 1992; Epstein, 2001; Rideout, 1995; Scane, 1996). Further, the study contrasts parental engagement in school councils in both a high and low income area of a large urban school division, examining distinct differences in parent expectations and experiences in their school involvement.

To date, school councils have been part of the educational fabric of Alberta for ten years. Growth inhibiting factors in school councils have been already identified (Johnson, 1993; Miller, 1995; Pepler, 1999). These include: insufficient membership to sustain the school council, lack of representation in terms of race, unwillingness of the principal to involve parents in educational decision-making, and inadequate training for school council members about educational matters such as curriculum, staffing and budgeting concerns. This study is significant in extending this body of research to include school council policy formulation and the socioeconomic circumstances of families. In addition, this study illustrates specific conditions and strategies in fostering school council formation in low-income communities, where research has shown that parental involvement is difficult to encourage (Pepler, 1999).

This study also contributes to the growing literature in the field of school and family partnerships by highlighting the factors that encourage as well as inhibit school council development. It exposes the experiences of individuals taking part in a school council: their expectations for involvement, their meanings of success, the challenges they perceived and the approaches they most valued.

Given the wide range of social differences between parents at both sites, this research further expands our knowledge of the relationship between social positioning and education. Finally, the findings of this research may have significance for school-level administrators and educators that have a genuine interest in enabling parents to participate in shared decision-making at their schools.

Theoretical Framework

Critical social theory is of central importance to this work. Concerned with the issue of power, research utilizing this approach encourages a questioning of obvious meanings, assumptions and beliefs. In particular this study drew upon the work of French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu to critically examine the relations among parental school involvement, class and cultural capital, and educational policy and leadership. As well, the study was informed by writings of Michael Apple, Henry Giroux, and Peter McLaren who are particularly critical of the misuse and abuse of power in school relations as a vehicle for manipulation and subjugation of people.

Limitations

According to Rudestam and Newton (2001), limitations are "restrictions in the study over which you have no control" (p.90). In my study, the limitations included (1) the nature of parental involvement in these schools, (2) the extent to which parents trusted me sufficiently to share fully their perspectives and experiences, and (3) having only one investigator.

When studying family involvement in education, it is important to accommodate the modern diversity of families. Changes in family composition and arrangement have been dramatic, and we now have many variations in the family structures. Barbour & Barbour (1997) claim that the single-parent family in which one parent lives with his or her children was becoming one of the most common family groupings in today's society. As well, some children had no organized family and are living in institutions or boarding facilities that served as a family substitute. Less common family groupings involved children living in homes not headed by a parent, while significant numbers of young children lived with grandparents, aunts, cousins, and even non-related adults.

Studying parental involvement in their children's education demands attention to the diverse nature of families. According to Bloom (1992), parents are not a homogenous group. She states that, "not every parent can ride a white horse into the schools to rescue them" (p.28). By this, she means that we should find ways to bridge the gap with parents who can't get beyond the front doors of the school. For example, there were some parents in her research who felt that the schools wouldn't listen to them. According to Lareau (1987) usually these are minority or low-income parents - parents who by virtue of their ethnic, racial, or economic background were disenfranchised from the system. They may lack time to be involved in their children's education, lack support, or possess fear that voicing their concerns will be shunned by educators and, therefore, increase their alienation. At the other end of the spectrum, Bloom contrasts these families with those who come to the school and speak eloquently about the needs of their children and even organized a write-in campaign to terminate an inept school superintendent.

Depending on the subject areas being queried, this study may have been prone to some inaccuracy as a result of inaccurate recall, lack of information, or discomfort with self-disclosure. As evidenced above, all families are unique and it is plausible that some families may falsify information in the fear of exposing poor parenting practices. To overcome the dilemma of credibility, I stated clearly the intent of my research and ensured confidentiality with each participant.

According to Anderson (1998), successful case studies often use a team of researchers to incorporate the diverse and complementary strengths of the individuals. This was evidenced in a study commissioned by the Newfoundland government, (Collins, Cooper and Whitmore, 1995) whereby three researchers investigated seven different schools in Newfoundland to test the conditions needed for the effective functioning of school councils in the province. Similarly, Yin (1994) contends that a case study investigation should often rely on *multiple investigators* to intensively collect data at a single case.

My study however has been limited to one investigator, which Merriam (1988) explains may lead to “mistakes being made, opportunities being missed, and personal biases interfering” (p.37).

Delimitations

According to Rudestam and Newton (2001), delimitations are limitations on the research design which were self imposed. To keep my research manageable, I delimited it to a case study of two sites within one large urban school district. As well, observations were delimited to a particular moment in the school’s history: six months in 2004. It is possible to assume that the membership make-up of both educational governance sites may have differed depending on the period of the year.

Another delimitation of this study was that it only included individuals who were members of the educational governance bodies. It is possible that parents who were involved in educational governance were more interested about how their children were doing in school, were more selective about the schools their children attend and were perhaps most often, parents who were more likely to attend parent-teacher meetings, sports events, concerts, or participate in other student performances. Other parents who chose not to participate in educational governance were not included in this study.

While the data of the study was being collected, I was a full-time teacher with the same urban school board, although in a different school than either of those in this study. I was unable to be at the research sites during the school day to view interactions between the parents and principals. Many parents at both locations that were involved in educational governance were also active volunteers at the school in their child's classroom, but these parents were not observed outside the context of the educational governance meetings that occurred during the evening. Further, I am aware that my teaching position in the same board brings certain biases and general prior knowledge of the schools and neighborhoods involved in the study. I have endeavored to check this bias through procedures of trustworthiness employed in certain phases of data analysis.

Structure of the Thesis

This thesis is divided into seven chapters. This chapter provided background information of school councils in Alberta and introduced the research topic, the significance for choosing it, the research questions, and approaches to studying them.

Chapter Two explores the relevant literature on parental involvement in education to this study. Particularly, it focuses on the development of school councils from an international perspective to provide a foundational understanding for interpreting school councils within the Alberta context. As well, the review highlights the gendered nature of parental involvement in education, the impact of social positioning on parental involvement, challenges facing school councils, and the issue of democratic participation.

Studying the dynamics of educational governance is a complex task that requires a theoretical grounding that can take into account the various complexities involved. As stated in Chapter One, educational writings in critical social theory have informed my research. Chapter Three discusses the major tenets of critical educational theory that influenced my analysis of relations among parent participation in schools, class and educational governance.

Chapter Four outlines the research design, methods of data collection, the procedures used to extract meaning from the data, and the approach taken to ensure justifiability of interpretations. Chapters Five and Six present the findings of the research and describe both case studies. Chapter Seven, the final chapter, analyses and compares these findings. As well, this chapter proposes areas for further inquiry and makes recommendations for practice.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

This chapter traces the genesis of the school council as a structure intended to increase parents' role in educational decision-making. Exploring the development of school councils in New Zealand, England and Wales, Australia, the United States of America, and Canada during the period 1980-2005, a background to the present situation with regard to parental involvement in educational decision-making will be presented. This broad focus was chosen to build a foundational understanding of school councils in different contexts outside Alberta, and to highlight how different countries perceived the importance of involving families in the educational decision-making process.

This is significant because the context of school council development in Alberta has a global dimension. What has happened to schooling and education in Alberta needs to be located within this international context since Alberta does not stand alone in the restructuring of education. The four cases described in this chapter provide a useful background for a study of Alberta school councils as they are all predominantly English-speaking, advanced industrialized democracies whereby school restructuring entailed a reorganization of administrative structures to develop a collaborative, decentralized system of education. The 1980s were chosen as a starting point since arguments for more parental involvement in education began to receive considerable impetus both locally and within the international arena during this time.

The democratic ideal of school councils and parent involvement in schools more generally has been inhibited by the politics of social class and gender. Substantial research has documented these issues and their implications are summarized here. Other challenges reported by school councils have also been traced through empirical research, and provide a useful background to compare with findings of the present study: (a) the limited input allowed by school councils into substantive governance issues; (b) unclear roles and responsibilities; (c) lack of support by teachers and principals; (d) poor attendance at meetings; (e) time constraints; (f) the preponderance of fundraising; (g) lack of acceptance by school boards; and, (h) minimal influence on student achievement. The chapter ends with a synthesis of these themes, linking them to the research questions of this study.

School Councils in the National and International Arena

The following section will provide an overview of reforms for involving parents in educational decision-making. The purpose is to situate Alberta within a global context and understand the different forces which sparked similar reforms in New Zealand, Australia, England and Wales, and the United States.

School Councils in Alberta

The concept of school councils was first introduced in Alberta in the 1988 School Act. Section 17(1) and 17(2) of the School Act stated that parents could establish a school council and the majority of members must be parents of students attending the school where the council was to be established. According to Alberta Home and School Councils' Association (1995), school councils came into being as a means to facilitate collaboration among all education partners in the local school and to enhance student learning. They were mainly established to serve as an advisory body to the principal.

Prior to their mandated inception, a series of public consultations were held. For example, a survey conducted by the Alberta government in 1990, *roundtable discussions* conducted during the fall of 1993, and a task force on the roles and responsibilities of school councils held in the spring of 1994 purported that there was very little uniformity between school councils within Alberta and they did not share a common purpose. As well, information attained from these inquiries suggested that the level of input which parents had into the decision-making process varied between locations whereby some parents had no role at all to others where parents were extremely active in playing a hands-on role in daily school operations. This indicated that the Alberta government was interested in increasing parental input in educational governance. However, in 1995, school councils were deemed to be mandatory as every school was required to have one.

Section 17 of the Alberta School Act (1995) states that “a school council shall be established in accordance with the regulations for each school operated by a board” (Alberta Education, 1995). The Act goes on to assert that the majority of members on a school council were to be parents of students attending the school. Regulations accompanying the School Act mandated that schools were required to hold an establishment meeting no later than February 15, 1996. The roles of school councils were also contained in the act.

17(4) A school council may, at its discretion,

(a) advise the principal and the board respecting any matter relating to the school,
(b) perform any duty or function delegated to it by the board in accordance with
the delegation,
(c) consult with the principal so that the principal may ensure that students in the school have the opportunity to meet the standards of excellence set by the Minister,
(d) consult with the principal so that the principal may ensure that the fiscal management of the school is in accordance with the requirements of the board and the superintendent, and
(e) do anything it is authorized under the regulations to do

(Alberta Education, 1995).

Section 17 changed the scope of local input into educational decision-making to include school council membership, the purpose of school councils and school-based decision making. It is interesting to note that parents were not given any flexibility in terms of designing the mechanics of their school council. Instead, the government implemented a bureaucratic structure that all schools were expected to follow.

New Zealand

The uniqueness of educational reform in New Zealand in the late 1980s is that it was predominantly radical and aggressive. These qualities were illustrated by the 1988 educational reforms, during which the highly centralized and regulated system for administering New Zealand's state schools was dismantled and replaced with a model of single-school lay governance. For example, in 1989, New Zealand abolished all its school boards and established school councils to manage school affairs. According to Newport (2000), education during the 1980s in New Zealand was overly centralized and real decision making powers rested with an intermediary board structure of ten education boards. This board structure controlled and administered primary education on a regional basis, including exercising powers relating to resourcing, property, staffing and the hiring and firing of teachers and principals. There was virtually no ability for parent voice to be heard.

This style of educational governance coupled with an economic crisis during the late 1980s led the national government in New Zealand to establish a task force in 1987. Known as the Picot task force, its purpose was to review the administration of education in public schools. According to Levin (1999), one major recommendation of the task force involved creating governing councils in each school with a majority of elected parents, giving these councils control over budget, staffing, and school policy.

As a result of the Picot report, the government introduced new legislation contained in *Tomorrow's Schools*, an educational paper that radically changed the education system in New Zealand. Edney (1993) asserts that *Tomorrow's Schools* resulted in the government of New Zealand greatly reducing its public sector spending and eliminated all school boards in 1989. Newport (2000) further claims that these educational changes introduced a sense of decentralization whereby schools had their own governing bodies. Hepburn (1999) also suggests that this new method of family involvement resulted in the running of schools as a partnership between the education professionals and the families whereby parents were given authority over the school budget, staffing and program delivery.

According to a study documenting the effects of this educational reform on New Zealand schools, there is considerable evidence supporting the initiative to decentralize education. Dougherty (2001) contends that the decentralized form of educational governance in New Zealand has saved the government billions of dollars and produced better results. For example, the elimination of all boards of education and their replacement with local boards of trustees that are elected by parents has delivered accountability directly into the hands of the parents and had a positive impact on principal-teacher-parent relations.

Not all research, however, pointed unequivocally to the positive components of the *Tomorrow's Schools* project. According to Wylie (1997), there is a need for increased funding. Specifically, more funding was needed for professional development activities so teachers and principals could learn new and innovative ways to interact with families. As well, with increased workloads averaging 2.5 hours per week, teacher turnover had increased and the quality of life outside school had also decreased.

This information suggested that New Zealand school councils may have increased parental involvement and devolved some of the school's governance work onto parents. However, the economic context had a particularly pertinent influence on educational reform. For example, Edge (2000) purports that school councils came into being in New Zealand as part of a series of rapid and far-reaching government reforms. An increased market orientation was evident throughout these reforms with increased 'accountability' and 'efficiency' as prominent themes. While many schools reaped the benefits of having decision-making more responsive to the needs of the community, on the other hand, considerable stress was placed upon principals and teachers to ensure the reform was brought to fruition.

England and Wales

In contrast to the New Zealand case, Dale and Ozga (1993) claim that in England and Wales educational reforms reverted to tighter curriculum regulation and control of the teaching force. New Zealand reform was far more radical in attempting to remove education from the arena of national public debate altogether, and focused more broadly on state-market relations as a whole. But in England and Wales, parental involvement on school councils represented a significant component of the decentralizing agenda which gained momentum during the 1980s. According to Fujita (1999), the Thatcher and Major administrations worked enthusiastically to restructure education and passed a series of Education Acts from the 1980s to the early 1990s. Dealing specifically with parental involvement in educational governance, the 1986 Education Act required the restructuring of school governing bodies to reduce the power of local education authorities (LEAs) and to increase the representation of parents and local business circles in education. Consequently, the 1988 Education Act sought to improve education by further expanding the roles of families and the local community. According to Bolton (1993), the 1988 Education Act had much to do with the "Thatcher Government's macro-philosophy that efficiency and quality are best sustained and enhanced in situations where users and customers have choice and the information and the scope to use it as they decide – in other words, where there is a market" (p.5). Coady

(1997) shows that this philosophy of “market” educational restructuring was based on a view of schools as small businesses, competing with each other for resources, and marketing their services directly to attract desirable “clients”.

Another factor initiating the educational reform movement in England and Wales during the late 1980s was financial concerns. According to Thomas (1993), economic factors could be cited as an important variable which initiated the 1988 Education Act. For example, an inflationary hike caused by the oil crisis of the mid-1970s resulted in the government needing to reduce and control public expenditure. Therefore, monetary constraints were a plausible argument for educational restructuring in England and Wales.

This growing awareness on behalf of the government to get more value for their money initiated the development of a system of school management known as the Local Management of Schools (LMS). As an offshoot of the 1988 Education Act, Fujita (1999) claimed that this policy expanded the power of the school governing bodies, giving them more autonomy to control their own budgets and manage their own schools. As well, another initiative, “grant-maintained schools” proposed by the 1988 Education Act, resulted in additional changes. Rogers (1992) claims that this initiative allowed schools which had been maintained by a Local Education Authority to "opt out" of the LEA's control and receive their funding via grants from the central government. When a school was transformed to grant-maintained status, its governing body was reconstructed to consist of teachers, parents and people from the local community, taking over ownership of the school's property. They were responsible for determining how money would be spent and making decisions on hiring personnel, staff development and equipment. Raham (1996) explains that the idea of 'grant maintained schools' resulted in the creation of self-governing schools that offered choices and alternatives within the public system, and were strictly accountable to families.

These changes, however, resulted in considerable hardship, experienced mainly by the school principals. Williams, Harold, Robertson and Southworth (1997) discuss the complexity of this movement by asserting that principals and staff members at the schools were encouraged to create self-help networks to assist one another regarding their new roles and responsibilities. These additional tasks included financial planning, increased paperwork, and lengthy consultations with school trustees occurred since "the education system is now run by volunteers taking on roles previously played by full-time, paid personnel of the regional education boards and Local Education Authorities" (Williams et al., 1997, p. 628).

Despite the fact that parents were given a greater say in their children's education, the research indicated that transferring administrative and school staffing decisions to schools had a major impact on staff workload. The principal and staff members shouldered the burden of educational reforms as they were required to spend extra time developing financial plans, reviewing policy guidelines, and meeting with various consultants.

Australia

According to Louden and Browne (1993), during the 1970s Australia experienced "rapid inflation, a decline in the price of mineral exports and decline in the competitiveness of Australian manufactured goods" (p.113). This in turn led to a severe financial crisis. At the same time, most Australia state systems were highly centralized and the *Karmel Report,* released in 1973 by the Commonwealth's Interim Committee for the Australian Schools Commission, recommended a devolution of responsibility.

> The Committee favours less rather than more centralised control over the operation of schools. Responsibility should be devolved as far as possible upon the people involved in the actual task of schooling, in consultation with the parents of the pupils whom they teach and, at senior levels, with the students themselves. [Interim Committee for the Australian Schools Commission, 1973, pp. 10]

This excerpt indicated that the Committee was interested in finding alternatives to the control of the operation of schools and, according to Louden and Browne (1993) this report indicated an overall lack of resources with considerable inequalities between schools, many inadequately trained teachers, an insufficient curriculum which did not take into account the individual differences of students and an authoritarian and hierarchical atmosphere which permeated the education system. This information prompted educational reform.

In 1981, this was evident in the development of self-managed schools. According to Harman, Beare and Berkeley (1991) a self-managing school was basically a decentralized school that had a significant amount of authority and responsibility to make local decisions related to the allocation of resources. Unlike the schools in England and Wales which had the choice to "opt out" of the national system, self-managing schools were not autonomous bodies. Instead, these schools remain within the centrally-determined framework and were not considered truly independent.

While significant changes occurred in Australian education in the early 1980s, initiatives to involve families in the educational process began as early as 1972. In fact, section 83 of the Education Act 1972 provided for the establishment of school councils. According to the legislation,

> 83. (1) Each Government school providing courses of instruction in primary or secondary education is to have a school council. [Education Act, 1972, Section 83]

In conjunction with the head teacher, the school council was primarily responsible for the governance of the school. Its duties included:

> (a) strategic planning for the school;
> (b) determining policies for the school;
> (c) determining the application of the total financial resources available to the school; and
> (d) presenting operational plans and reports on its operations to the school community and the Minister. [Education Act, 1972, Section 84]

This indicated that parents were encouraged to participate in school governance by assisting the principal with decisions that influenced the life of the organization.

Evident in this review of Australian educational reform was the need to restructure an overly centralized system based primarily on economic hardships. As well, the 1970s and 1980s denoted a major shift in educational governance whereby parents were given more input into educational decisions and the balance of power shifted from governmental control of schools to local governance.

Chicago

The Chicago school system experienced a crisis in the 1970s and 80s brought on by increasing poverty, the flight of middle-class families to the suburbs, and a declining tax base. According to Bryk et al. (1994), the result was persistent budget shortfalls and an increasingly impoverished student population. The authors suggest that between 1978 and 1984, the dropout rate stood at about 43 percent, reaching two-thirds in some low-income neighborhoods, and half of graduates were reading below the 9th grade level (Bryk et al. 1994).

Important efforts to restructure and decentralize educational governance in the United States came about during the 1980s with the release of a report produced by the National Commission on Excellence entitled *A Nation at Risk*. Specifically, the findings of the report suggested that states should raise their high school graduation requirements, that schools, colleges, and universities adopt more rigorous standards and higher expectations for academic performance and student conduct, and that citizens across the nation hold educators accountable for enacting educational reform. This indicated that the community was beginning to be recognized as an important stakeholder in the educational process, and the document paved the way for increased decision-making to be devolved to schools with parental involvement.

According to Rist (1990), parents spearheaded educational reform in Chicago and were on the front lines in calling attention to their widespread dissatisfaction with schools. "They organized citywide conferences on school improvement, established opposition to the status quo, and lobbied the state legislature to put parent-dominated governing bodies in place in each school." (p.22)

This synergy resulted in the introduction of the Chicago School Reform Act in 1989, and initiated sweeping changes in Chicago's educational system. According to the new legislation, each school within the Chicago public school system was to be governed by a local school council (LSC) comprised of six parents, two community representatives, two teachers and the principal. Parent members on the school council were elected by parents at each school. As well, school councils exercised real decision-making power. For example, their function entailed the hiring and evaluation of the principal, planning curriculum content and teaching methods, and working collaboratively with the principal on school improvement plans and budgets.

While this denoted a rapid departure from the previous centralized style of educational governance, it suggested that parents and community members were becoming part of the educational decision-making framework in Chicago during the late 1980s. For example, Hess (1995) claims that the experiment to reform education in Chicago was an inevitable consequence of years of school system floundering. He claimed that the school system in Chicago prior to reform was at-risk whereby students who showed the most promise were placed in schools with the most experienced teachers and resources. On the other hand, students who came from low-income families were placed in "holding pens" until they were old enough to drop out of school (p.20).

Despite the positive gains, some research indicated that the educational reform process in Chicago did not achieve noteworthy results. According to Organizer (1999), many teachers felt disturbed by the composition of local school councils. Their main grievance was that only two teachers served on the council while six parents comprised the majority of participants. As well, there was a growing sentiment among many teachers that *they* were the experts and too much power was being placed in the hands of parents. Another concern highlighted the inadequacy of some school principals to be democratic when selecting parent members to serve on the school council. Some principals were disrespected for hand selecting parents to assist them with school governance issues. Finally, Organizer (1999) claims that local school councils were given control over limited funds. Referred to as "Chapter 1 Poverty Money", this funding only represented a small portion of the education dollar.

Summary of National and International Perspectives

The previous discussion on educational reforms in Australia, England and Wales, New Zealand, Chicago, and Alberta indicates that all areas have undergone extensive changes in their education systems. In particular, in all of these regions responsibilities which previously rested with centralized educational authorities have been delegated to local schools, and legislation has been enacted to involve parents directly in school governance.

In New Zealand, Australia, the UK and the U.S., just as in Alberta, reform initiatives were supposedly guided and justified by the objectives of enhancing the quality of public education and increasing the accountability of the educational system. However, it is interesting to note that economic hardships often spurred educational reform in all regions to give parents a greater role in educational governance. With this in mind, it is plausible to assume that the inception of school councils in Alberta may have been guided by socio-political trends prevalent in various parts of the world.

Families' Social Positioning and Parental Involvement

Considerable literature has responded to the need to recognize the lack of differentiation of parents within parental involvement research (Connell et al., 1982; Hanafin and Lynch, 2002; Lareau, 2000; Lightfoot, 1978; Neychyba et al., 1999; Vincent, 1996). Together, these studies have reaffirmed the significance of social factors on parents' capacities to become involved in their children's education and denounced research which assumed the homogeneity of parents and power neutrality in terms of parental involvement in education.

A significant change in the debate on educational disadvantage has involved the shift of focus from the social backgrounds of students to the process of schooling itself and the role of parents within that process. The cultural deficit theory, popular in the United States, in the 1950s and 1960s purported that low-income families were judged to have little interest in education, therefore condemning their children to failure within the school system (Bernstein, 1971; Mandelbaum, 1964). This research led to the belief that schools did not make a difference in terms of altering the value orientations of low-income students.

Subsequent research on parental involvement in education has used the term 'difference' to replace 'deficit' in relation to low-income families. Educational disadvantage has been attributed to differences between home and school environments rather than deficiencies within low-income families. For example, Connell et al. (1982), investigated the relationship, within the Australian context, between two groups of students and parents which they referred to as ‘working-class’ and ‘ruling-class’ along with how these groups interconnected with their schools and teachers. Approximately 100 teenage students, equal numbers of them male and female and equal numbers of them working-class and ruling-class were interviewed and so were their parents and many of the teachers and principals at their schools.

The central contrast in their book is between what the authors refer to as ‘working-class schools’ and ‘ruling-class schools’. Working-class children attended working-class schools also known as state comprehensive schools while children from ruling-class families went to ruling-class schools which were private fee-paying institutions. Distinguishing between both schools, the authors denote the ‘market situation’ within which ‘ruling-class schools’ functioned. For example, private schools needed to attract students to survive and they needed to be attractive to their customers, who were the students’ parents. At the same time, the average parent of a student at a private school was at least the social equal, if not in a superior social position, to most of the school staff. As the authors suggest, the ruling-class parents regarded teachers as their employees and rarely hesitated to inform the principal about what they thought was best for their children and possessed the ultimate power of withdrawing their child from the school if they were unsatisfied with the service.

The relations between working-class parents and state comprehensive school were mediated quite differently from the private schools, for the state schools were controlled bureaucratically. The status relationship between working-class parents and schools were completely opposite than those of ruling-class parents since many felt intimidated by the school and by the academic and social qualifications of the teachers. Only a few working-class parents were willing to express their dismay with school policies, and even if they did so, the principal was under no circumstances dependent on their approval.

Given these findings, Connell et al. (1982) suggest that many working-class parents felt powerless in relation to the educational system and claimed that the problem was not that working-class parents and their children rejected education, but that they were never really offered it. The authors recommend that the working-class schools should seek to be ‘organic’ to their class in the same way that the ruling-class schools have come, as a result of the market situation, to be ‘organic’ to their class.

Similarly, Lightfoot (1978) argues that schools and families do not always match in their perspective or purpose. Stereotypes, ill-founded beliefs, and negative perceptions often limit and prevent partnerships between educators and low-income, diverse parents. Lightfoot indicates that prejudice, inequality, ethnocentrism, and racism often precludes parents and teachers from interacting in a constructive, growth-oriented, child-centered fashion. Incorporating data from quantitative behavioral data, in-depth teacher interviews, and student interviews, Lightfoot speculates that parents and their children could be an excluded and powerless group based on their social conditions.

Support for this perspective is offered by Lareau (2000) who spent six months observing two first grade classrooms, one in a working-class school 'Colton' and the other in an upper middle-class school 'Prescott'. She interviewed the parents, teachers, and administrators of six children from each classroom at the end of first and again at the end of second grade. In each school, the children were white and divided equally by gender and by whether or not their mother was in the labor force.

Examining the effect of parental involvement in education on student academic achievement, Lareau found that social class had a powerful influence on parental involvement patterns. She concludes that social class provided parents with particular sets of resources that either facilitated or limited their ability to shape their children's educational experiences. Upper-middle class parents had a greater share of cultural resources than their working-class counterparts. By cultural resources, she refers specifically to the symbolic access to the world of educated people, social status, confidence, income and material resources, work relationships that were similar to those of teachers, and social networks that provided access to educators and information about schooling. She argues that upper-middle class parents were better able to activate these resources to improve their involvement in schools, and recommends that schools designing parental involvement programs consider influences of social class upon parents' ability to intervene in their children's educational affairs.

In a similar vein, Hanafin and Lynch (2002) conducted group interviews with 21 parents in a large urban area in the Republic of Ireland where there was high unemployment, high levels of early school leaving, dependence on the welfare payment system, and low levels of parental involvement in education. Their findings suggest that all of the parents interviewed acknowledged and emphasized the importance of being involved in their children's education. However, parental communications with their children's teachers were described by parents as "inadequate, difficult, off-putting, excluding, and frightening" (p.41). As well, parents in their study suggested that formal structures for parental involvement such as parent councils were ineffective because they felt that council was controlled by the principal and that membership as a parent did not involve any opportunity to influence school policy. While parents felt that their role in the parent councils was undemocratic and unbalanced, others perceived it to be limited to fund-raising which they considered to be unsatisfactory.

As Vincent (1996) claims, this level of parental involvement in parent councils is not uncommon as the voices of low-income families are often muted in the operation of schools. During the 1990/91 school year, the author spent five weeks in each of two primary schools in England, Hill Street and Low Road. The latter served low-income families as over half the student population came from families with no wage earner. Parents at Low Road reported that teachers lacked the enthusiasm to involve them in their children's education. While Vincent notes that Low Road was understaffed with a high frequency of disruptive child behaviours, her research also suggests that educators exclude low-income parents from school involvement. Since many teachers in her study were predominantly white, middle class individuals, Vincent concludes parent-teacher relations are shaped by power imbalances of race and class. She observes that teachers measured parents according to pre-determined (middle class) models of what constituted a 'good parent'.

Another report by Nechyba et al. (1999) addresses three possible mechanisms through which social class might operate in schools. First is a 'culture of poverty' in which working class families place a decreased value on education than middle class parents and are less disposed to become involved in schools. Second is that working class families have less 'cultural capital': values, beliefs, norms, attitudes, and experiences that can be translated into social resources and utilized within the education system. Third is that schools are middle class institutions with particular exclusive values that work to marginalize parents that don't conform.

As evidenced in this section, the nature of parental involvement is problematic as social positioning differences between parents have effects which are both subtle and complex. Income levels are linked to different cultural resources and outlooks which in turn shape parental behaviour. Less-educated parents feel less competent and confident to help their children in school and many often feel intimidated by educational professionals. In contrast, high-income families see themselves as responsible for customizing their children's educational experiences, and possessing the capacity and resources to do so. In addition to social positioning, gender also assumes a significant role in shaping the ways parents are involved in their children's education. The next section outlines the predominant role of women within the research literature on parental involvement.

Gender and Parental Involvement

Within the sphere of parental involvement in education, research has highlighted its gendered nature in terms of both the practical and educational work involved (David et al., 2003; Reay, 1998; Griffith and Smith, 1990; Standing, 1999). As well, several research studies have highlighted clear disparities between the close and active involvement of low-income women and the more distant role of men (Blair et al., 1994; Goldscheider and Waite, 1991; Hawkins, 1992; Lamb et al., 1987; Lareau, 2000; Nord, Brimhall, and West, 1997; Parke, 1996). Within this literature, there is considerable evidence suggesting that parental involvement in schooling is largely women's work.

Some research has theorized that women are biologically disposed to be more nurturing than men (Downey, 1994; Rossi, 1978; Thomson, McLanahan, and Curtin, 1992). These studies profess that women are socialized to meet the expressive needs of children, to be communicators, and show warmth and affection. Men, on the other hand, are socialized to be breadwinners, enforcers of the rules, and disciplinarians. This view suggests that men and women perform different functions within the family. Therefore, men and women appear to specialize in different activities, with women being more likely to be involved in school functions.

In today's society, however, Epstein (2001) suggests that policies on parental involvement in education needs to address single-parent households, recombined or blended families, foster-parent homes, extended families with relatives, or a variety of other family situations. As well, Karweit (1993) claims that a major challenge for family support professionals is to devise policies that reflected the new realities of family structure, lifestyle, and ethnic characteristics.

Recognizing these changes within families, Standing (1999) asserts that as educational policy has demanded more parental involvement in their children's education, the number of lone mother families has also been increasing. Based on interviews with 28 low income, lone mothers in England, she argues that there is a major contradiction between parental involvement policy and social policy aimed at lone mothers. Social policy emphasizes getting lone mothers into the paid employment market by cutting welfare provision. Parental involvement policy assumes parents (typically mothers) will contribute their days and evenings to schools: helping with homework, assisting in the classroom, taking part in daily school activities and outings, and volunteering for extra curricular activities. This assumption is based on time, material resources, and knowledge of the educational system which many lone mothers in Standing's study simply did not have. Similarly, Griffith and Smith (1990) show that parental involvement policies implicitly depend on the existence of the nuclear, two-parent family and problematise all other family forms.

In a later work, Griffith and Smith (2005) explore the relationship between mothering work in the family and the social organization of schooling. In particular, they focus on the hidden gendered labour that promotes both school success and failure and examine how mothers' different economic positions enable their children to have very different experiences in schools. Schools impose their order on the routines of the household and it is primarily the women's job, argue Griffith and Smith, to get their children to school on time and be available when they return. This coordination of responsibility is significantly easier for mothers who possessed the economic resources to fulfil this demand. As well, their findings indicate that the mothering discourse assigns to women the major role in the work of sustaining their children in school. At both research sites, men played a marginal role in the overall educational work done at home that complements the work of the school.

Given the support for increased involvement of parents in their children's education and the positive contributions parents can make to their children's development, it is interesting to note that women and men often assume different roles in attempting to shape their children's educational experiences. Although both parents may believe in the importance of school success as a pathway to occupational rewards, gender roles may have shaped the ways in which adults promote this success. For example, Reay (1998) claims that it is possible to view parental involvement in terms of 'discourses' which position mothers as the primary parent who either enhances or holds back children's educational progress. Conducting in-depth interviews with 33 mothers and three of their male partners in England, her findings reveal that significant inequalities existed between the sexes with mothers assuming the primary responsibility of being involved in their children's education. Similarly, David et al. (2003), in their exploration of gender issues and parental involvement practices in England, found that mother interviewees outnumbered fathers three to one. As their study relied on parents volunteering to participate, the authors conclude that "mothers remained the more regularly responsible parent" (p.7), and suggest the possibility of increase in lone parent (mother) households.

In addition to women being the predominant figures in terms of parental involvement in their children's education, research has indicated that the social positioning of families influence the degree to which men are involved in their children's education. According to Lareau (2000), there is a clear division of labor by gender among low-income families. In her participant-observation of two first-grade classrooms Lareau found that women were responsible for waking their children in the morning, monitoring their daily emotional states and experiences at school, attending parent-teacher conferences, and volunteering around the school. Men, on the other hand, assumed a distant role in their children's education and her study revealed that they served primarily as a source of authority within the family. For example, if women felt that their children were not behaving properly, they would enlist the support of men to enforce discipline.

In high income families, Lareau also found that women assume most of the responsibility of being involved in their children's education: meeting children when they came home from school, talking to them about their day, reading to them, determining subject areas in which children needed help, and deciding when to enlist the support of tutors. Men's role in the routine events of their children's education was a more peripheral one. However, Lareau shows a gendered difference in terms of parents' social positioning: high-income men assumed more authoritative roles with schools than did women and often challenged teachers' decisions.

Similarly, Lamb et al., (1987) found that in low-income families, the father spent only about one-quarter as much time as mothers do in direct contact with their children. As well, Parke (1996) asserts that low-income men and women differ in the types of activities they engage with their children: women tended to routine caregiving activities for their children such as preparing meals and taking children to appointments, while men played with children.

Other research has indicated clear associations between father involvement in their children's education and socio-economic status indicators such as education, income, and social class. For example, a study by Goldscheider and Waite (1991) reveals an association between higher education of men and higher positive engagement among school-age children. Similarly, Blair et al. (1994) indicates that higher paternal income is associated with more positive father-child engagement among target children aged five to eighteen. Nord, Brimhall and West (1997) also claim that the likelihood that men of first through fifth graders were involved in their children's schools increased with the fathers' level of education. Unemployment was also cited as negatively affecting the relationship between fathers and their children. According to Hawkins (1992), unemployed fathers are more likely to limit their involvement in their children's education.

While the importance of parental involvement in their children's education has been recognized for many years, this section has shown that parent involvement is often assumed to mean mother's involvement. This section also indicated that the social positioning of parents influenced the degree to which fathers are involved as low-income men often defer child-raising responsibilities to women. The next section examines other challenges facing educational policy development in regards to parental involvement.

School Councils: Problems and Possibilities

Some researchers have argued that parental involvement through school councils can be fundamental to a healthy system of public education (Creese & Bradley, 1997; Epstein, 2001; Rideout, 1995). School councils also have been described as having the potential to improve accountability within education by affording parents and other stakeholders the opportunity to work collaboratively and provide constructive suggestions for the improvement of learning (Delaney, 1994; Duma, 1998, Parker & Leithwood, 2000). Some claim that school councils promote broader stakeholder ownership of the norms and values of a school, making for a more cooperative working atmosphere while harnessing the considerable weight of parents' opinions in response to educational restructuring (Dixon, 1992; Dye, 1989, Foster, 1984).

As a method for including parents in the education of their children, school councils afford members an opportunity to express their opinions and contribute to school plans and policies. However, several obstacles appear to inhibit parents' full participation in educational decision-making. These include: (a) limited input allowed by school councils into substantive governance issues, (b) unclear roles and responsibilities, (c) lack of support by teachers and principals, (d) poor attendance at meetings, (e) time constraints, (f) the preponderance of fundraising, (g) lack of acceptance by school boards, and (h) the assertion that school councils have a marginal influence on student achievement.

Limited input allowed by school councils into substantive government issues

According to the literature, many parents often feel powerless and dislike having no real decision-making power when they attend school council meetings. For example, Jenkinson (1995) claims that legislation governing school councils should be changed to give parents "a greater direct voice" in education. In his study, one school council member in Alberta wanted more that just an advisory role in her child's school and felt that school councils were feeble organizations since parent members were only permitted to consult, inform and advise. Reid (1998) reports that when school councils first came into existence in Canada, media coverage tended to create an impression among prospective council members that they would have real decision-making powers regarding their child's education. However, many were disappointed when they found out that they only serve in an advisory capacity. Collins, Cooper and Whitmore's (1995) research further supports this notion. They conducted interviews with school council members at seven schools in Newfoundland to test the conditions needed for the effective functioning of school councils in the province. One major issue which emerged from their study was that many school council members were dissatisfied with the advisory nature of school councils and many claimed that if school councils were to attempt to improve student achievement, they must have the authority to set policies to achieve their goal. One council member stated,

> If that's all we are – an advisory group then these councils will very quickly disappear… councils are expected to have a certain amount of authority… everyone of us wanted to get on this council so that we could somehow affect some changes which would be for the betterment of students… if we're not doing that, then school councils won't last (Collins, Cooper and Whitmore, 1995, p.2).

Dixon (1992) suggests that parental involvement in educational governance could take two forms: limited partnership and full partnership. While limited partnership restricted parent involvement to roles considered appropriate by policy makers, administrators and teachers, full partnership incorporated parents as full partners in the decision-making processes affecting their child's education. Dixon further asserts that this real power would allow parents, teachers and administrators to work together as a team and have a stake in what is being done to meet the needs of all learners. Similarly, Peters (1995), reflecting upon the history of school council formation in the Chicago Public School District contends that a purely advisory role for school councils is problematic as they amount to "narrow special interest groups speaking only on their own behalf" (p.60). Instead, Peters (1995) argues that school councils should be granted legitimate decision-making powers concerning "budgeting decisions, staffing decisions and discussions relating to school operation, student behavior codes, hours of operation, supplementing programs, etc." (p.60). This would further enhance collaboration between the home and school to the benefit of both.

Not all research, however, suggests that it is desirable for school councils to have greater power when it comes to decision-making. For example, Morgan and Fraser (1992) in their examination of three school councils (two primary and one secondary) in Northern Ireland, found that few parents expressed interest in having authority to make decisions affecting the school. Many parents felt that they lacked the required skills necessary to make administrative decisions concerning the school. One parent stated:

> I would not feel qualified to take part in the actual running of the school. That should be left to professionals… I would rather leave that kind of thing to those who can do it (Morgan and Fraser, 1992, p.6).

This indicated that some parents had misgivings about possessing formal decision-making power and would have felt both inadequate and overwhelmed with such responsibility.

Another study by Johnson (1993) investigating the perceptions of chairpersons of 133 school councils across the Province of Alberta found that "school councils are satisfied with, at most, an advisory role, and do not wish to actually make decisions" (p.41). Using a survey as the primary instrument for data collection, it is interesting to note that a superintendent in one Alberta school district denied Johnson permission to conduct his study within that jurisdiction as it could have created a feeling amongst school council members that they *should* be granted actual decision-making power which could "create increased problems and challenges in administration and governance at the school and Board level" (Johnson, 1993, p.39).

Finally, giving school councils both an advisory and decision-making function may be desirable. Martin (1993) in a review of the legislation governing school councils in British Columbia, Alberta, and Quebec indicates that school councils which have both an advisory and a decision-making role are more effective than those with simply an advisory role. For example, school council legislation in

British Columbia and Alberta states that parents on such bodies may act only in an advisory capacity to school boards, the principal, and staff. There is no accountability system in place to ensure administrative cooperation with parental views on school councils. In Quebec, school councils do have an advisory function, however, they are not primarily considered advisory bodies. For example, the school board in Quebec is mandated by legislation to consult with the school council before implementing policy in respect to

> the continued operation or closing of schools; the rules governing the allocation of financial resources among schools; the criteria for school enrolment; the distribution of educational services among schools; and the details concerning the implementation of the basic school regulation and the programs of study (Martin, 1993, p.76).

From this perspective, the law in Quebec provides for a compromise between parents who wish to assume a strictly advisory role on the school council and those who prefer greater decision-making authority.

Unclear roles and responsibilities

Another factor which challenges the effective operation of school councils deals specifically with a lack of clarity regarding the mandate of school councils. Jenkinson (1995) asserts that the proposed roles of parents, teachers, principals and school boards are ill-defined and overlapping which results in much frustration and confusion among members. Similarly, Reid (1998) claims that there is no clear explanation as to why school councils are created as part of our educational system. While the reason may be linked to school improvement, there is uncertainty regarding the ultimate goal or function of school councils. For example, in some jurisdictions, school council members are active participants in student disciplinary matters reviewing suspensions given to students by principals. This creates degrees of grief and turmoil for some school council members as they feel uncomfortable making such decisions.

In their study of three school councils in Nothern Ireland, Morgan and Fraser (1992) show that considerable confusion arises surrounding the roles and responsibilities of members on school councils: parents are unsure of what the school expects of them. Believing that school councils need to be focussed to meet the needs of the parents to ensure their effectiveness, the authors argue that school councils should be a forum for parents to discuss with teachers specific aspects of the school's work.

Lack of support by teachers and principals

Several research studies conclude that teachers and principals assume an influential role in shaping parental involvement in educational governance. For example, Wignall (1996) states that a major challenge for any school council is to create an atmosphere of inclusion whereby all members are respected and valued. According to Reid (1998), school councils may become breeding grounds for contempt as school council members sometimes target problem teachers or principals rather than focussing on strategies to improve school programs. As a result of targeting specific individuals, teachers and administrators should be wary of this when helping develop school councils. Dixon (1992) claims that one of the biggest barriers to involving parents in educational decision-making is the lack of support from educators.

According to the research, as the chief executive officer of a school, the principal's willingness and ability to encourage and engage in a collaborative process of educational decision-making is essential to the success of school councils. Watkins (1990) claims that the principal plays a vital role in the running of a school council. In his study of six school councils over a twelve month period in Australia, one respondent stated: "I think the principal has an incredible amount of power… Where a school council is made up of really articulate parents and teachers and yet it is totally dominated by the principal" (p.326). This suggests that the domination of the meetings by the principal sought to undermine and inhibit a collaborative working atmosphere with parents. Similarly, Campbell (1992) claims that the ultimate responsibility for creating partnerships between the school and the home rests with the principal: the principal should directly mobilize parental involvement in school councils through frequent communication, workshops, etc. David (1994) also suggests that a school council's success is largely determined by the principal, particularly those using a democratic participative style rather than authoritarian or controlling leadership.

Teachers also play an important role in their establishment at a school. David (1994), studying school councils in Kentucky, found that teacher support for school councils was problematic. Many were unwilling to assume extra duties and become involved in school councils on top of an already hectic schedule at school. David states, "teachers are especially unlikely to want to assume new responsibilities. Many teachers are already responsible for several extracurricular activities, and younger teachers are likely to have young children at home" (p.708).

Discussing how teachers' attitudes can be a formidable barrier to school councils' success, Aronson (1996) reports that teachers in her study felt threatened by the fact that parents wanted to become vocal in helping make administrative, curricular, and instructional decisions. As a result of this attitude by teachers, Aronson claims that many parents subsequently feel unappreciated and lose incentive to participate in school councils.

Poor attendance at meetings

According to the literature, several factors account for poor attendance at school council meetings. For example, Epstein (2001) contends that in many schools, parents' opinions about school policies are not taken seriously which resulted in poor attendance at school council meetings. Similarly, Hrycauk (1997) asserts that parents do not want to participate in school decision-making. Lorinc (1997) furthers that poor attendance at school council meetings is a universal problem that challenges the formation of school councils, particularly in low income areas or communities where English is a second language.

Another study by Morgan and Fraser (1992) posits that poor attendance at school council meetings is a major problem. Investigating three schools in Northern Ireland, they explain that parents lose interest in school councils as their experiences of them were often "off-putting and a waste of time" (p.5). As well, they comment that parents find the business of school councils to be trivial and repetitive such as having endless discussions about school uniforms. The authors claim that some parents indicate they would much rather volunteer around the school cleaning or painting than sit at meetings. Similarly, Aronson (1996) suggests that poor attendance at school council meetings may result because school councils do not represent the interests of the broader parent population at the school.

According to the literature, school councils have the potential to be over-run by individuals who solely want to satisfy their own self-interests. For example, Jenkinson (1995) shows that some may come to school council meetings with a personal agenda that meets the needs of their own children and not those of the general school population. Similarly, Reid (1998) claims that school council operations are hindered by members speaking about problems of individual students, teachers or parents. As a result, personal agendas detract considerably from the collaborative enhancement of parent-school relationships and serve to limit participation.

Time constraints

Lack of time to attend meetings was addressed in the literature as a significant barrier to school council development. Collins, Cooper and Whitmore (1995), in their study of seven pilot school councils in Newfoundland, found that lack of time on behalf of parents was an obstacle to having school council meetings. Some parents asserted that work, family commitments and participation as volunteers in other community groups inhibited them from being involved in schools while others stated that they would have found time if they felt that their contributions were valued. According to Chavkin (1989), a lack of time and resources on behalf of parents and teachers is a significant barrier that prevented the establishment of school councils. Reid (1998) supports this notion and adds that the development of effective school councils requires considerable time and energy.

Similarly, Leithwood and Menzies (1997), in a review of 83 empirical studies on the topic of school based management and school councils during the period 1985 to 1995, found that excessive time demands on the principal was a frequently cited obstacle to school council development. Hrycauk (1997), in writing about the components of a successful school council, shows that while today's teachers are busier than ever and becoming involved in educational decision-making and school committees requires a substantial amount of time, teachers in his study are willing to put in this extra time as long as their input is valued.

As these studies indicate, time is a precious resource in today's families. For many parents, a major barrier to becoming involved on school councils is a lack of time. Parents who work during the evenings are automatically unable to attend, and in any case, evenings are the only time that some parents have to spend with their children.

Preponderance of fundraising

Traditional forms of parental involvement in their children's education often involved parents at schools holding bake sales or assisting with playground duty. However, school councils were developed with the aim of creating more opportunities for parents to connect with schools through the school discipline policy, curriculum, methods of instruction, student assessment and reporting frameworks and general educational policies.

According to the literature, however, many parent advisory councils have little influence in educational matters because fundraising has dominated the agenda. Ungarian (1997), in her study of parent advisory councils in Alberta, found that the primary role of these organizations was making fund-raising decisions that focused on whether to "boil 'em or bake 'em and white chocolate or dark" (p.19). The author explains that the establishment of school councils, however, provides members with the opportunity to extend beyond this traditional role and become involved in more meaningful ways that deal specifically with advising the principal on educational matters.

Despite the new roles which school councils afford parents, some literature asserts that very little has changed with respect to how parents are involved in their children's education. Dukacz (2000) reports that parents involved in school councils across Ontario were so worn out by raising money for school supplies that they had no time to participate in educational decision-making. Considerable time was spent at the school council meetings discussing issues pertaining to fundraising for textbooks, physical education supplies, music supplies, photocopying, breakfast and lunch programs and phone lines for internet hook-ups. One recommendation from this report suggests that the government ensure "adequate funding for all textbooks, school supplies and equipment implied by the curriculum expectations for schools" (Dukacz, 2000, p.12). Another study by Reid (1998) documents the dark side of fundraising, claiming that some parents become involved for personal gain such as by ensuring their own business supplies school equipment.

Lack of acceptance by school boards

According to the literature, school boards have an important role to play in parent involvement programs. For example, a document produced by the Canadian School Boards Association (1995) claims that school boards can recognize and reward outstanding parent involvement programs; hold conferences on parent involvement for parents and educators and make public service announcements to encourage parents to become more involved with working with schools.

Despite the potential of school boards to work in a partnership with school councils, some literature reveals that many school boards have inadequate resources to become involved with school councils. For example, Reid (1998) claims that as a result of declining funding, difficult budget choices and potential school closures, many school boards have little time to dedicate to school councils. As well, the author contends that school boards have not created appropriate mechanisms to get advice from school councils and thus receive very little input from them about educational matters. Similarly, a report by the Canadian School Boards Association (1995) suggests that school board members do not reach out to include parents as partners in decision-making for fear that they may reduce the board's authority. As well, Collins, Cooper and Whitmore (1995), in their study of Newfoundland pilot school councils, found that many school council members felt that school boards had provided them with little or no support or encouragement.

Minimal influence on student achievement

Some literature contains indications that school councils have marginal effects on student achievement. For example, a study by Watkins (1990) reports that the school curriculum had been enhanced through the involvement of the parents on the school council. In his examination of six school councils in Australia over a twelve month period, one school council chairperson reported that parents were of utmost importance in securing additional curricular materials such as films to be viewed in the classroom. While this did not directly translate to improved student achievement, it suggests that the parents can help make resources available. Another study by Flinspach et al. (1992) indicates that the development of school councils results in higher expectations for students among parents and teacher. However, it does not examine the direct effects of school councils on student achievement. Similarly, Alexander and Keller (1994) document largely neutral effects of school councils on changes occurring at the school. The authors contend that school councils are introduced to encourage new relationships in the school, promote enhanced communication between the school and the community, and offer parents the opportunity to become involved in educational decision-making. However, they also assert that very little has changed as a result of this new legislation as “information provided by principals indicated that parent and community roles were highly traditional in nature; nothing new or innovative was reported” (p.263). No significant improvements in student achievement are documented in their study as a result of the introduction of school council legislation. Another study by Parker and Leithwood (2000), investigating the influence of school councils on school and classroom practices at five schools in Ontario in 1996, claims that school councils have a marginal influence on both schools and classrooms. In the absence of support from the district in terms of training for members and a lack of acceptance by teachers, school councils do not promote changes in the school or classroom.

Not all research, however, points to the relatively neutral effects of school councils on student achievement. In fact, some studies document negative consequences. For example, Bryk et al. (1994), measuring student achievement for all Chicago Public Elementary Schools between 1987 and 1992, claims that the system-wide trends in student achievement show no significant gains throughout this period. In fact, results in grade six mathematics depict their lowest achievement in 1992 than in other years. This is not to imply, however, that the introduction of school councils led to lower scores in student achievement. The authors acknowledge that other policy changes such as toughened student retention and the inclusion of new learners of English in the annual testing program can alter test results. However, their results indicate that significant achievement gains do not accompany reform during its early stages.

Similarly, Walberg and Niemiec (1994), in examining the effects of educational restructuring in Chicago during the late 1980s, argue that the transfer of considerable power to local school councils resulted in a decrease of the number of students scoring at or above national norms in reading and math at both the elementary and high school levels. The authors assert that despite the educational reforms, "Chicago schools continue to rank very low by national standards even those of other big cities" (Walberg and Niemiec, 1994, p.715). A more recent study by Krishnamoorthi (2000) reveals that school councils do not improve student achievement. Investigating the aspects of the performance of school councils in Chicago that matter for student achievement, the author reports that neither the ability of a school council to evaluate principals nor their ability to formulate budgets had any significant influence on student achievement.

Similarly, Smylie (1992), studied teachers' willingness to participate in decision-making at the school level in a mid-western metropolitan kindergarten through grade eight school district. The findings suggest that the conditions under which teachers participate in decision-making strongly influences their willingness to become involved. For example, if teachers perceive that their relationship with the principal is open, collaborative and supportive, they are more likely to express willingness in participating in decisions concerning the curriculum and instruction at a school. On the other hand, if the teachers' relationship with the principal is closed, exclusionary or controlling and if the teacher is committed to the norm of professional privacy, Smylie (1992) asserts that they are less willing to participate in educational decisions at the school. This is relevant to student achievement because the author believes that teachers who participate in educational decisions at a school are more likely to gain knowledge about different classroom practices and improve their sense of responsibility and accountability for students. In a later study, Smylie et al. (1996), investigate the instructional outcomes of participative decision-making. Here, they found that in schools where teacher participation in school decision-making was frequent, regular and inclusive and where leadership was shared between principal and teachers, the overall quality of teachers' current practices improved and so did student achievement outcomes. However, in schools where teacher participation in decision-making was sporatic and noninclusive and where leadership was mainly from the principal, negative consequences resulted. They posit that at schools where teacher participation in decision-making is poor, it becomes a distraction from classroom activity. These distractions result in "additional time to deal with non-instructional matters, work overload, role conflicts, and tensions with other teachers and administrators… which led to a reduction in attention to instruction and to a subsequent decline in student learning" (Smylie et al, 1996, p.194). This indicates that participatory decision-making may trigger mechanisms that both serve to enhance and decrease student achievement.

Democratic Participation

The past decade has witnessed significant attempts to activate educational policy and programs for creating and sustaining a democratic ethos in schools. As is evident in the preceding review, school councils have been mandated by governments in North America, the United Kingdom, New Zealand, and Australia. While this may have been done for several reasons including improved efficiency, accountability, and morale, some literature suggests that school councils may serve as a means of democratizing schools (Apple and Beane, 1999, Buras and Apple, 2005; Leithwood, Jantzi, and Steinbach, 1999; Mintrom, 2001; Miretzky, 2004). Together, these studies indicate that parental involvement in educational governance may contribute to the participatory awareness, skills, and attitudes which are fundamental to life in democratic societies.

Outlining the elements needed to create and sustain an environment that nourishes strong relationships, Dewey (1966) argues that if people are to achieve and sustain a democratic way of life, they must have opportunities to learn what that means. In particular, schools should be consistent with the basic tenets of democracy, enhance the self-concept of the learner, actively involve the learner, place the concrete before the abstract, be flexible, and place the teacher in a helping relationship. Noting two fundamental criteria for democratic schools, Dewey (1966) claims that schools should be a vibrant community in which "playgrounds, shops, workrooms, laboratories not only direct the natural active tendencies of youth, but they involve intercourse, communication, and cooperation" (p.358). As well, Dewey believes that learning *in* the school should be analogous with that *out* of the school, with close interplay between the two. However, Dewey also notes that schools are places where students should learn how to change their society and what students learn in school must be useful in the activities they will engage in when they leave the school. A fundamental principle underlying his writing is that in promoting democracy, it is essential that the community act democratically. If this does not occur, the community will foster non-democratic habits and thus eliminate the possibility of achieving a common understanding.

In more recent literature, several authors contend that the ultimate aim of education is to prepare effective citizens to maintain democracy (Apple and Beane, 1999; Gutmann, 1987; Hahn, 1998; Hochschild and Scovronick, 2000). For example, Apple and Beane (1999) write that the tradition of democratic schools has been sidelined, but needs to be revitalized and considered. Providing four case studies to give reality to the possibilities and difficulties of democratic schools, Apple and Beane assert that considerable collaborative work by teachers, encouraging the responsibility to the learner for their own learning, and giving pupils a voice in their education serves as a refreshing challenge to the traditional framework of isolation from stakeholder involvement.

Similarly, Hochschild & Scovronick (2000) argue that an important role of schools in promoting democracy is to teach democratic practices. These include such things as following properly designated procedures, negotiating as opposed to using violence to solve problems, respecting those who disagree with one's opinion, taking turns, expressing views persuasively, organizing change with others, competing fairly and winning or losing gracefully (p.213). The authors contend that without these ideals and active, participating citizens, the future of democracy will be severely threatened. As well, Hahn (1998), in her research focusing on the direct role of the school in encouraging political discussion in England, the Netherlands, Germany, the US, and Denmark is enthusiastic about the contribution of citizenship education programs to democratic preparation. She claims that classrooms which foster open inquiry and schools which encouraged participatory civic behaviours provide young people with the opportunity to experience democratic life. Consequently, students learn the theory of democracy by experiencing it in practice. Purporting that political education in schools can make a difference to attitudes, Hahn contends that this should be encouraged. She also expresses concern about what she sees as low levels of "trust" and "efficacy" among adolescents, and puts forward the view that schools should attempt to curtail this.

Constructing a theory of education that places the fostering of democracy at its core, Gutmann (1987) provides an in-depth exploration of the necessary components of democratic education. The author contends that there are five essential elements for democratic education. First, democratic education must teach mutual respect and the value of working through differences. The author argues that well-run schools teach students respect for opposing points of view and ways of life. Second, democratic education should be nondiscriminatory and no one should be excluded from receiving a democratic education. Third, funding for democratic education should be sanctioned by the government as distribution led by market forces would result in poor or uninterested families receiving very little. At all costs, educational funding should not deprive any child the ability to participate in schooling. Fourth, local autonomy of schools must be balanced against the pursuit of national educational goals. Here, Gutmann argues that local school boards should retain substantial control and freedom to exercise their discretion over education as unlimited local control could seriously undermine democratic values, especially when some localities may have the tendency to display bigotry. Finally, decision-making over schooling should be jointly undertaken by the provinces, families, and educators. She states that "states that abdicate all educational authority to parents sacrifice their most effective and justifiable instrument for securing mutual respect among their citizens" (1987, p. 32-33). Given this, Gutmann contends that all stakeholders should have input into educational governance. However, it is important to recognize that families are culturally different and dispose of unequal cultural resources in aligning with school cultural norms.

Dealing specifically with parental involvement in educational governance, some research indicates that this type of participation may serve as an effective tool in fostering democratic education. Arguing that in a society where market forms of organization are pervasive and democratic forms appear increasingly constrained, Mintrom (2001) contends that schools represent both vital and unique sites where democratic ideals can be developed. In particular, Mintrom argues that providing parents with a forum to discuss educational issues and engage with each other in the practice of collaborative problem solving and decision-making can have transformative effects with respect to how decisions are made. For example, analyzing the Chicago reform of 1988 whereby school councils consisting of the principal, parents, teacher, and community representatives were given broad powers to engage in collaborative decision-making, Mintrom (2001) posits that this initiative served to expand local democratic participation and created new opportunities for stakeholders to discuss school problems.

Maximizing democratic practice and minimizing bureaucracy was also cited by Leithwood, Jantzi, and Steinback (1999) as a feature of influential school councils. Their study comprised a two-stage research design which consisted of both surveying 3,150 teachers in 95 elementary and 14 secondary schools in three school districts and interviews with educational stakeholders to solicit their opinions on school councils. The results of their research indicate that certain components of school councils may function to promote democratic ends. For example, they claim that school councils have the potential to engage parents with other members of the wider community in conversations about education, community values, and life aspirations of their children. As well, school councils might contribute to an educational system with "greater internal learning capacities" (p.489). Here, the authors assert that school councils may serve as problem-solving bodies unhindered by top-down bureaucratic controls.

Another study by Miretzky (2004) recognizes the importance of collaborative discourse between parents and teachers as a method of espousing democratic communities. Conducting both observations of school council meetings and interviews with parents and teachers, Miretsky concludes that school councils may serve as a forum whereby both teacher and parent perspectives are valued and where there is open and honest discussion about educational issues. Despite the fact that the school council meetings she attended during her research were plagued with poor attendance, she asserts that school councils can foster a democratic atmosphere in schools as they can make room for parents to talk with teachers. This, in her view, should be accompanied by a commitment to mutual respect for one another and an appreciation of multiple perspectives.

Some research, however, argues that school councils are not democratic bodies and may obscure the unequal power relations that exist between parents and schools. For example, Fine (1993) claims that parental involvement in educational governance may be viewed as part of a strategy to improve education for children of color and low income students whereby the construction of the ideal parent is directed towards minority parents and low income parents. However, if some of these parents do not conform to the school's expectations for parental involvement, their children may be affected negatively by receiving less attention and commitment from the teacher. Therefore, parental involvement may result in little more than reproducing and reinforcing the status quo instead of serving as a mechanism for school improvement. She also asserts that parents are asked to do too much with little support. In her view, some parents enter the public sphere within the realm of educational governance with neither resources nor power. Many are not welcomed by schools to engage in the serious work of rethinking educational structures and practices. These influences make it all the harder for parents to engage in democratic practices with the school.

Similarly, Nakagawa (2000) criticizes parental involvement in educational governance, asserting that the discourse of involving parents in this capacity controls who gets involved and how the involvement is structured. For example, she states that the good, involved parent is the one who visits the school sites and participates in sanctioned school activities such as school councils. The parents who work in jobs whose schedules conflict with school council meetings or who have difficulty attending meetings are recognized by the school as being uninvolved. As well, school council meetings are largely structured by the school, and parents are controlled through this medium. The author also cautions that those parents who do not meet the school's expectations in terms of involvement may have no right to expect quality education for their children. As a result, non-participation in educational governance may serve to repress democratic ideals, reproduce social inequality, and further limit the possibilities for building family-school relationships.

Together, these studies indicate that school councils may serve to both promote and discourage democratic parental participation in educational governance. While it is clear that the establishment of school councils alone doesn't necessarily foster collaboration and cooperation between parents and schools, some research suggests that certain factors such as direct and honest communication, trust, mutual respect for one another, and mutual goals help promote participation and active involvement in educational governance.

Summary

From a review of the literature on the international perspectives of parental involvement in educational governance, issues of social class and gender, the challenges facing school councils, and the issue of democratic participation, several specific obstacles clearly hamper meaningful parental voice in schools and educational decision-making. The gendered nature of parental involvement, inequity caused by social positioning of parents, limited advisory capacity for parents, unclear roles and responsibilities, lack of support by teachers and principals, poor attendance at meetings, time constraints, the preponderance of fundraising, lack of support from school boards, and their minimal influence on student achievement have all been documented in empirical research on school councils.

These issues indicate a need for research illustrating the characteristics and processes of school councils that fulfill their productive possibilities. Through a case study design, the present investigation sought to contribute to the literature by exploring the nature of parent-principal relations at two schools in a large urban school district to help illustrate the unique environments in which they developed and existed. A deeper understanding of the theoretical foundations and methodological concerns guiding this study are addressed in the following two chapters.

CHAPTER 3

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Each society needs critics and artists to idealize a higher order of freedom than that which has been actually attained. (Agger, 1976, p.18)

Introduction to the theoretical position

While this research employed predominantly interpretive methods of data analysis, certain conceptions of schooling borrowed from critical theory were also employed to illuminate broader systemic dynamics being played out in the dynamics of school councils. According to Foster (1986), critical theory questions the "framework of the way we organize our lives or the way our lives are organized for us" (p.72). This interpretation established the challenge for this research: to explore the nature of parent experience and parent-principal relations, while also examining the framework that organizes these relations. Therefore, the study went beyond describing everyday parent involvement to also document how gender, social positioning, relationships, structures, and practices often defined how parents participated in the school. With particular attention given to the variables of gender and social positioning, a critical perspective was useful in that it challenged certain common sense assumptions and accepted norms and practices of parental involvement in educational governance.

Critical theory provides us with tools to more fully understand and combat the complex relationships between education and power. In an early work, Apple (1979) provides a useful summary of the central features of critical theory that contribute to educational analysis:

> The intent of… critical scholarship in general, then is two fold. First, it aims at illuminating the tendencies for unwarranted and often unconscious domination, alienation, and repression within certain existing cultural, political, educational, and economic institutions. Second, through exploring the negative effects and contradictions of much that unquestioningly goes on in these institutions, it seeks to promote conscious (individual and collective) emancipatory activity. That is, it examines what is supposed to be happening in, say, schools if one takes the language and slogans of many school people seriously; and it then shows how these things actually work in a manner that is destructive of ethical rationality and personal political and institutional power. Once this actual functioning is held up to scrutiny, it attempts to point to concrete activity that will lead to challenging this taken for granted activity. (p.133)

Education is far from a neutral, apolitical activity. However, as will be discussed in this section, critical theory provides instruments to dissect and combat the relations of power in schooling. In doing so, critical theory aims to open space for critical reflection and change in an attempt to challenge the existing, often oppressive social order.

The origins of critical theory

Critical theory began with Marxist perspectives attempting to respond to social hardships stemming from the rise of capitalism. According to Agger (1998), from the days of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, Germany had garnered great hope for the international communist movement. Its working class was large, well organized, and quite militant. It was widely assumed that the German proletariat would act as the catalyst for world revolution.

However, despite this enthusiasm, Milner and Browitt (2002) assert that by the late 1920s, Germany no longer presented a major source of hope and inspiration. Rather, the working class that had spurred Marxist-inspired socialist theory was proving to be a receptive audience for Nazi propaganda. The Frankfurt School came into being in an attempt to revivify Marxian thought.

The Frankfurt School

Founded in 1923 after Felix Weil, the son of a wealthy grain merchant in Argentina, persuaded his father to finance a research institute, the Frankfurt School soon became an important centre for contemporary Marxist thought. According to Agger (1976), the institute's first director, Carl Grunberg, set it up as a center for research in philosophy and the social sciences with an emphasis on reviving and reorienting Marxian theory. However, after Max Horkheimer took over as director in 1930, the focus widened. Leading members such as Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin, and Herbert Marcuse developed a version of Marxism known as critical theory. They formulated influential critiques of capitalist culture and, according to Outhwaite (1994).

The contributions of Jurgen Habermas to critical theory

After a period of exile in the United States because of the Nazis, the Frankfurt School returned in 1949 to Germany, where Jurgen Habermas became its most prominent figure. In the spirit of his Frankfurt School predecessors, Habermas has criticized modern industrial societies for excessive emphasis on instrumental action, which involves doing whatever is necessary to attain given ends. This emphasis, he argues, has prevented them from appreciating the importance of communicative action, which implies understanding and coming to agreement with others.

Defining the public sphere as a realm of social life which was "open to all, in contrast to closed or exclusive affairs" (Habermas, 1989, p.1), he claims that the public sphere is a place where people can go to discuss matters of general interest and where differing opinions can be resolved. However, this public sphere is eroded through the manipulation of the public by advertising agencies. Habermas (1989) argues that the sphere of the media has also been transformed from facilitating rational-critical debate to limiting public debate so that citizens are reduced to passively absorbing information.

The broad suggestiveness of Habermas' perspective for shared understanding amongst citizens is given more detailed analysis in his two-volume work: *The Theory of Communicative Action.* In his first volume, Habermas (1984) introduces the concept of 'communicative action' whereby people achieve understanding of each other through cooperative interpretation of a situation and seek to reach an agreement through rational argumentation. An essential requirement for successful communicative action are conditions outlined by the 'ideal speech situation'. These conditions are defined as communicative practice independent from distortion or coercion "that excludes all force – whether it arises from within the process of reaching understanding itself or influences it from the outside – except the force of the better argument" (p.25). This indicates that everyone in society capable of speech and action has the opportunity to participate, question, introduce new lines of thought, and express their own opinions and attitudes.

Understanding structural inequities in education and school councils

Building upon the works of the founding members of the Frankfurt School several critical theorists have shown how schooling practices help reproduce patterns of oppression and exploitation that exist in society, based on structural differences in power and status. Of particular interest for this study are the writings of Pierre Bourdieu, Michael Apple, Henry Giroux, and Peter McLaren, who expose unjust circumstances that surround the educational experiences of the dispossessed i.e. the poor, minorities, and other marginalized people. While being fully aware of the immense struggles to be faced to achieve the goal of educational equity, these writers are also committed to the notion that education can be a transformative process, through emancipatory educational reforms to reduce inequality. Below, I discuss their significant contributions to transforming education.

Social and Cultural Capital – Pierre Bourdieu

Pierre Bourdieu, writing extensively about the social reproductive nature of the education system, offers considerable insight about educational inequality. Arguing consistently that class culture is a major factor in determining educational success and failure, Bourdieu (1986) devised the term capital to describe cultural advantages that groups of people possessed that favored them within a particular social context. These advantages relate to a variety of traits, including ethnicity, language, appearance, wealth, and access to resources and education. Differences in the amounts and types of capital people possess affect their social positioning within a particular social context.

In schools, Bourdieu (1986) argues that working class culture is either not recognized and simply negated or is considered an inferior form of culture. Cultural reproduction, the process of handing down beliefs, values, ideas, practices and knowledge, is an essential function of the education system. But reproduction through schooling is primarily concerned with the reproduction of dominant (middle) social class culture, which is presented as universal culture itself. Other forms of culture are unrecognized or are defined negatively.

As well, Bourdieu (1991) argues that middle-class children arrive at school with a ready established bank of cultural attributes such as style of speech or membership in a prestigious family. Dominant culture for Bourdieu consists of a set of priorities, characteristics, behaviours, or orientations - or *habitus* - that dominant class groups already have and that subordinate class groups must strive to acquire if they are to compete for educational success. In this fashion, the author demonstrates that middle-class children are already attuned to the codes and meanings of schooling, which are opaque for working-class children. The school reward system recognizes dominant cultural behaviours positively and others negatively. For Bourdieu, success in schooling is a matter of adopting these behaviours.

Bourdieu (1986) further expands the notion of capital beyond its economic conception which emphasizes material exchanges, to include “immaterial” and “non-economic” forms of capital, specifically cultural and symbolic capital. He explains how the different types of capital can be acquired, exchanged, and converted into other forms. Bourdieu argues that an understanding of the multiple forms of capital helps clarify the structure and functioning of the social world.

Cultural capital refers to the accumulation of cultural attributes that can be reinvested into education with a positive return to their holder. This form of capital represents the collection of non-economic forces such as family background, social class, varying investments in and commitments to education, and different resources which influence academic success. Basically, cultural capital is a product of education visible in social habits, styles of speech, and modes of conduct that belong to a general way of being that Bourdieu refers to as habitus. Habitus corresponds to the cultural/class environment of a person's upbringing. Middle-class children come to school well versed with cultural capital that they can translate and transform through education into both social and economic capital, because they accumulate more cultural capital through the various levels schooling, which they later translate into wealth and power. According to Bourdieu and Patterson (1990), academic success can be cashed in for a well-paid and high-status job.

As well, Bourdieu (1986) claims that cultural capital can take three forms: embodied capital, objectified capital, and institutional capital. *Embodied capital* is directly linked to and incorporated within the individual and represented what they know and can do. This refers to the mannerisms, attitude and social practices exhibited by a particular type of person. Embodied capital can be increased by investing time into self improvement in the form of learning. As embodied capital becomes integrated into the individual, it becomes a type of habitus and therefore cannot be transmitted instantaneously.

Objectified capital includes documents or other artifacts that are recognized as having value within a particular community. For example, cultural goods, material objects and media such as books, paintings, machines, dictionaries constitute this form of capital. They can be appropriated both materially with economic capital and symbolically by embodied capital. According to Grenfell and James (1998), objectified capital is almost always contingent on the possession of economic capital.

Finally, *institutional capital* includes academic credentials and qualifications that demonstrate particular accomplishments: places of learning, universities, and libraries. Institutional capital is often related to the job market as high academic qualifications tend to lead to more prestigious jobs and better salaries.

In addition to cultural capital, people also possess degrees of economic capital and social capital. According to Bourdieu (1986) *economic capital* is literally money wealth: it can be used in any part of society. *Social capital* refers to a person's ability to gain access to cultural institutions and organizations; this access may be partially determined by a person's race, class, and gender. It exists as a network of social relations or an individual's sphere of contacts. For example, this form of capital can embody membership to prestigious groups such as the alumni of an elite school or a select club of nobility. Bourdieu (1986) claims that social capital is determined by the size of an individual's relationship network, the sum of its cumulated resources (both cultural and economic), and how quickly the individual could set them in motion. According to Bourdieu, social networks need to be continuously maintained and fostered over time in order for them to be called upon quickly in the future. As Bourdieu (1986) states, for any form of capital to advantage a person, capital must be institutionally legitimated and acknowledged by people with power. According to Luke (1996) "capital is only capital if it is recognized as such; that is if it is granted legitimacy, symbolic capital, with a larger social and cultural field" (p.329). As well, Bourdieu (1986) states that the ability and talent of an individual is primarily determined by the time and cultural capital invested in them by their parents. For example, he claims that "the scholastic yield from educational actions depends on the cultural capital previously invested by the family" (p.244) and "the initial accumulation of cultural capital, the precondition for the fast, easy accumulation of every kind of useful cultural capital, starts at the outset, without delay, without wasted time, only for the offspring of families endowed with strong cultural capital" (p.246). Based on this view, cultural capital regulates and reproduces itself: families of a given cultural capital can only produce offspring with an equal amount of cultural capital.

Therefore, according to Bourdieu and Passeron (1990), those pupils bestowed by their upbringing with the habitus that most resembles the values through which the school seeks to work are most likely to benefit from the education system and achieve academic success. In this conception Bourdieu expands class analysis in schooling by expanding the notion of capital, from a solely economic conception to include cultural (embodied, objectified, and institutional) and social capital. While social and cultural capital can be derived from economic capital through varying efforts of transformation, they conceal their relationship to economic capital. Thus the underlying system of domination and class structure is reproduced and supported without conscious recognition by its social members. Inequality is embedded in, legitimized and disguised by the education institution, which presents itself as a neutral and equitable arena.

Towards More Democratic Structures in Schools - Michael Apple

In many of his critical writings, Michael Apple reveals the complex relationships between educational policy, its practice, and the relations of dominance and exploitation within larger society. Believing that structural inequalities in schooling ultimately limit and distort the capacity of oppressed groups in society to realize their fullest human potential, Apple and Beane (1995) articulated seven crucial characteristics for a more democratic school:

> (1) The open flow of ideas, regardless of their popularity, that enables people to be as fully informed as possible. (2) Faith in the individual and collective capacity of people to create possibilities for resolving problems. (3) The use of critical reflection and analysis to evaluate ideas, problems and policies. (4) Concern for the welfare of others and the common good. (4) Concern for the dignity and rights of individuals and minorities. (6) An understanding that democracy is not so much an ideal to be pursued as an idealized set of values that we must live and that must guide our life as a people. (7) The organization of social institutions to promote and extend the democratic way of life (p.6-7).

Together, these seven principles suggest structures, processes and curriculum that the writers believe will provide students with the experience of democracy.

Apple and Beane (1995) point out that democratic schools should function as a counterweight to managerially focused 'drill and skill' schools. Describing these democratic schools, Apple and Beane (1995) assert that, "democratic schools are both (humanistic and child-centered)...that seek not simply to lessen the harshness of social inequities in school, but to change the conditions that create them" (p.11). This indicates that democratic schools attempt to rectify the inequalities faced by students. Heterogeneous groupings of children are more democratic than streaming children on the grounds of ability. A democratic curriculum is also advocated by Apple and Beane (1995) to challenge the traditional "hidden" curriculum whereby "people learn significant lessons about justice, power, dignity, and self-worth" (p.13). They discuss the deskilling of teachers through prescribed curriculum, and contend that a more democratic curriculum encourages students to be critical investigators of society and its structural inequities.

Parent involvement in schools is commonly included in discussions about challenging schooling's embedded inequities and creating more democratic structures and practices. Working from Apple's critical conceptions, Peterson (1995) shows the positive aspects of a site-based council of parents and teachers. His case was a US elementary school in a Hispanic neighborhood, rescued from demolition by a parent coalition, and redesigned to incorporate principles of social justice. Extra funds were required to ensure parent involvement (two part-time parent organizers were hired, a Mexican American and an African American). Still, tensions arose: "middle class white parents clashed with single mothers of African American or Latino heritage" (p.75). Middle class parents became 'meeting happy' and scheduled long, frequent meetings that others could not attend because of child care expenses they could not afford.

Apple (1996) also addressed the relationship of parental involvement and inequity, showing how middle class parents strongly influence the organization of schools as well as teachers' pedagogic styles and curriculum content. Apple poses the question: How do school policies, procedures, and curriculum continue to privilege some while discriminating against others? He argues that conservative 'rightist' policies are dominating educational policy, curriculum, testing and governance:

> What counts as knowledge, the ways in which it is organized, who is empowered to teach it, what counts as an appropriate display of having learned it, and - just as critically - who is allowed to ask and answer all these questions, are part and parcel of how dominance and subordination are reproduced and altered in this society. (Apple, 1995, p.22-23).

The New Right Alliance, he argues, control the educational agenda for its own purposes, enlisting the consent of those being excluded or marginalized:

> Their interests are not in increasing the life chances of women, people of color, or labor. Rather it aims at providing the educational conditions believed necessary both for increasing international competitiveness, profit, and discipline and for returning us to a romanticized past of the ideal home, family, and school (p.28).

Thus Apple traces clear links between growing social and economic conservatism (the ideals of free-market enterprise, traditional family values, American patriotism, and priority given to business and industry needs) and the structural inequities played out in educational governance and curriculum.

Focusing on the bureaucratic nature of schools, Apple (1996) describes how, in Citrus Valley, a semi-rural western city of 30,000, professional educators mismanaged a series of parent and student complaints that the school system contributed to the growth of the populist right. In this case, parents were particularly upset about the selection of a language arts textbook by the school and rather than listening to grievances about the curricula and textbooks, educators, operating unthinkingly as bureaucrats, managed to maneuver the criticism of around thirty parents into protest meetings of 700. Educators positioned the parents as adversaries, the rank and file versus the power of the state, rather than discovering areas of critique and commonality.

In terms of parental involvement, the works of Michael Apple described in this section call for the free and continual exchange of information between parents and teachers and the involvement of parents in school affairs. Exchange of information between the home and school enables teachers to acquire knowledge of students and gain a direct understanding of difficulties experienced by parents, how parents think and act, what their attitudes are toward life, and what they want for their children. Indeed, his writings view significant parental and community involvement as essential to a democratic society, not simply as a mechanism of self-governance, but also as a means by which knowledge is socially constructed.

Critical Pedagogy, Radical Democracy, and Social Justice - Henry Giroux

Henry Giroux has spent considerable time studying educational systems, the various curricula taught in schools, and the messages and values that education instills in students. For this section, I concentrate specifically on Giroux's writings that focus on concepts such as the transformative intellectual and critical pedagogy.

Throughout his work within cultural studies, Giroux (2000) claims that culture is the site where identities are constructed, desires mobilized, and moral values are shaped. Importantly, culture serves as both grounds for contestation and accommodation where people imagine their relationship to the world and is an important site for radical democratic policies. While culture can be conservative and shape individuals into conforming to dominant modes of thought and behaviour, it also presents a site of resistance and struggle. For example, Giroux (2000) notes the irony that in a time of technological and cultural revolution marked by new media, technology, and forms of culture, there is a crisis of democratic culture. In terms of parental participation in school governance, this is significant because school councils can possibly serve as mechanisms to create new spaces to reinvigorate democratic culture.

Reminding us that schools are not artificial, neutral organizations, but instead shaped by parents, teachers, students, and community leaders, Giroux (1988b) analyzes the structuring of schools by exposing the different vocabulary, power, concepts, and knowledge that defines and shapes these institutions. In doing so, he shows that American schools do not allow members of marginalized groups (i.e. low income, ethnic minorities) to realize or define their interests. Instead, schools engage in educational policies that oppress them by imposing structures (i.e. curriculum) that is traditionally based and irrelevant to their life contexts. In terms of parental involvement, mandated participatory governance structures may serve a similar purpose in that minority families who are generally uninvolved in educational decision-making may perceive their lives to be deficient, deprived and underprivileged. Giroux argues that just as the curriculum ignores its own patterns of dominance over students, so do school councils fail to recognize their assymetrical power relations.

Claiming that the role of teachers is to attend to the inequities inherent in the structures of public schooling and the methods by which they could bring issues of social justice into classrooms, Giroux (1988a) proposes a daunting project for educational reform: teachers as transformative intellectuals. This new role encourages teachers to actively educate students in the language of critique and democracy. As a means of combating the erosion of teacher power within schools, Giroux (1988a) acknowledges an emancipatory vision for education whereby teachers are committed to understanding and engaging the struggles for equality and justice within schools. This is significant because it acknowledges the imbalance in power which frames the relationships between parents, especially low-income parents, and educational professionals. This inequality is often seen as stemming from the discrepancy between the professional knowledge of teachers and the limited knowledge of parents who have limited access to schools. For specific groups of parents such as low-income or those of ethnic minorities, this discrepancy is compounded by the dislocation between their own lives and that of the school. Thus, according to Giroux, the work of the transformative intellectual is to challenge the hegemonization of educational institutions and flesh out sources of oppression.

As evidenced in the above discussion, Giroux supports Apple's claim that schools mediate certain messages or values that privilege some groups and disadvantage others. Observing schools as both political and cultural sites as well as instructional institutions, Giroux claims they must become models of critical learning, civic courage and active citizenship. Although Giroux does not specifically mention parental involvement in his writings, a major theme emanating from his research is that teachers needed to be given greater control over their work to analyze the needs of their community and respond to wider social problems within the context of their school.

Development of a Critical Consciousness - Peter McLaren

Continuing the assault on how oppressive practices pervades schools that purport to serve the needs of a democratic society, Peter McLaren also shows how schools favor the interests of the dominant culture. A common theme throughout his work is that, recalling Giroux's position, schools must serve as moral agents whereby teachers and other educational personnel must challenge the existing hegemonic influences that create inequalities for low socio-economic groups in society.

McLaren (1993) investigated everyday school life in three eighth-grade classes in a Toronto Catholic junior high school whose student body was 75 percent Portuguese immigrants, focusing on certain rituals which took place in schools such as classroom lessons and assemblies. He concludes that these played an important role in reproducing and reinforcing existing patterns of class and ethnic dominance. Speaking to how a working class notion was produced in the classroom, McLaren claims,

> Ritualized classroom lessons tacitly created dispositions towards certain student needs while simultaneously offering to fulfil those needs. For instance, students were made to feel inadequate due to their class . . . status and hence the school offered to help socialize them into the 'appropriate' values and behaviours by tracking them into designated streams and basic level courses (McLaren, 1993, p.xiv).

This suggests that schools serve as powerful institutions that influence how students develop and maintain images of themselves and others.

This is significant to studying parental involvement in educational governance as school councils may be viewed as a "ritual" which may form and deform the identities of parents. For example, while McLaren (1993) believes that rituals enact meaning and that culture is formed by various rituals which occur in schools, it is plausible to assume that school councils evoke a predatory culture in schools by ignoring the wider dimensions of difference created by differences in parents' social positioning.

Providing educators with a guide to help them take action, McLaren (2003) proposes that schools must be foremost a social and moral agent. He sheds light on why disadvantaged students generally didn't succeed in school, and argues that the task of teaching has become devalued and deskilled, stripped of its mission to promote self-empowerment and social transformation.

Providing a portrait of public schools, McLaren (2003) writes that schools are able to favor the interests of the dominant culture because the dominant curriculum separates knowledge from the issue of power. The curriculum represents an introduction to a particular form of life; it serves in part to prepare students for dominant or subordinate positions in the existing capitalist society . . . the curriculum favors certain forms of knowledge over others and affirms the dreams, desires, and values of select groups of students over other groups, often discriminatorily on the basis of race, class, and gender. (p.211-212).

In a similar vein, school council policy, as it currently exists in Alberta favors parents which have a significant knowledge of the educational system and possess the resources needed to facilitate their involvement. Low-income parents are in a structurally powerless position when confronted by the rigidity of school council structure. As McLaren is particularly concerned with the modes of discourse between students and teachers and the organization of schools which reduce learning to its technical dimensions, the same could be applied to school council legislation which may oppress parents of low-income by denigrating the knowledge and experiences that characterize their daily lives.

Summary of critical perspectives

With the emergence of the Frankfurt School, social life including culture, ideology, language and everyday practice became subjected to critique exposing patterns of inequity and oppression. This serves an important foundation to understanding the writings of Bourdieu, Apple, Giroux, and McLaren which highlight the relations between power and education. Their rich variety of experiences bring to life the ideas and histories of groups of people that previously had been silenced in mainstream educational arenas. All four propose strategies relevant to schools to enliven and reclaim democracy. Bourdieu argued consistently that social inequalities are not simply based on wealth. His idea of cultural capital relates specifically to parental involvement in education, and has been taken up by many to show how initiatives for parents often disregard differences in family material and cultural conditions, are exclusive and inhibit participation (De Carvalho, 2001; Hoover-Dempsey, Bassler, Brissie, 1987; Lareau, 2000; Smrekar, 1996).

Similarly, Michael Apple, Henry Giroux, and Peter McLaren raise important questions about the school's treatment of gender, race, and socio-economic status and encourage educators to carefully consider how knowledge produced by schools perpetuates the inequalities that prevailed in society. Emphasizing the need to view schooling as a far-from-neutral public sphere, these authors highlight the need to challenge and change the structures of schools that reproduce inequities. In terms of parental involvement, considerable literature has also documented its maternal nature (David et al., 2003; Reay, 1998; Smith and Griffith, 1990; Standing, 1999). Identifying the need to untangle and expose hegemonic practices operating in schools, critical theory and particularly critical educational writing is especially useful for this research. It calls for schools to become more genuine sites of community, to challenge its own barriers to diverse groups of people, and to encourage parents to have a strong role and voice in school activity.

Although considerable research describes parental involvement practices from a school perspective and does not consider the politics of families, it is important to realize that public policy touches the private and, as this study illustrates, precisely articulates the roles of families and schools in social reproduction. Parental involvement in educational governance often presupposes the availability of time, material resources, and knowledge of the educational system, as well as particular values and social behaviours. A critical perspective exposes these expectations, revealing not only their exclusions but also raising questions about whose needs are served by such expectations. Critical theory also suggests that relationships between schools and families are complex, multiangled, and affected substantially by both the social circumstances of families and the dynamics at play within schools themselves: the result can be misinterpretations, inequities, and reproduction of classism, racism and sexism. Parental involvement in schools cannot be treated as an unproblematic, ungendered concept, free from class and cultural associations. To do so obscures differences and challenges, narrowing the scope of possibilities for democratic educational goals and practices.

CHAPTER 4

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

This study employed a qualitative, interpretive research methodology as I was interested in conceptualizing school and family partnerships from the perspectives of parents and administrators. To help promote equitable partnerships between the home and school, all stakeholders must share their insights, values, and conceptions about the respective processes that benefit children. Denzin and Lincoln (2000) describe the qualitative researcher as a "jack of all trades" who needs to be aware of many things that are going on at the same time: different voices, different perspectives, points of view and angles of vision. Merriman (1988) concurs with this view, explaining that qualitative research acknowledges the existence of multiple realities which are primarily a function of personal interaction and perception. My study was grounded in these perspectives, using qualitative methods to help me understand people's lived experiences and their personal meanings and contexts constituting these experiences.

The Case Study Method

Many diverse individuals appeared in my research. Each family member and principal held a set of assumptions about life, morality and relationships which was supported by a particular cultural context, and each set of assumptions was, to some extent, incompatible with the others. This was the major reason why I viewed my research as a crucible of multiple realities. My challenge was to try to understand these diverse realities, and the meanings of participants in ways that honoured their unique experiences and language.

The case study method I used was defined by Merriam (1988) as an interpretive case study. According to Merriam, the purpose of this type of case study is to gather information from a particular site with the intent of interpreting the phenomenon. Rather than just describing what was observed, interpretive case studies serve to analyse, interpret, or theorize about a given situation. This approach was best suited for my research because it allowed me to gain a thorough understanding of the experiences of families and administrators with regard to their involvement in educational governance. Specifically, this method helped me better understand and analyse the dynamics involved in educational governance meetings by illuminating how its practices operated to enhance or inhibit family participation. The case study method also provided for flexibility during the inquiry. Anderson (1998) explains that data collection and data analysis are concurrent activities throughout a case study. This permits the researcher to explore new lines of sight and recast various issues as the study unfolded. According to Bromley (1986), case studies, by their very definition,

> get as close to the subject of interest as they possibly can, partly by means of direct observation in natural settings, partly by their access to subjective factors (thoughts, feelings and desires). . . Also, case studies tend to spread the net for evidence widely, whereas experiments and surveys usually have a narrow focus. (p.23)

Similarly, MacNealy (1999) asserts that a case study aims to provide a holistic view of an event by producing new insights and describing relevant aspects of a situation that have not been previously considered. For the purposes of this study, the data collection methods used included interviewing and non-participant observation.

Data Collection

Selection of the Research Sites

To determine the two sites for my study, I spoke with the superintendent of a large urban school board, various school board members and educational consultants involved with school councils to obtain their views on school councils and receive suggestions for possible research sites. The following were two questions that I asked the educational personnel described above:

1. Can you suggest two schools (one located in a high socio-economic area and the other located in a low socio-economic area) within the school district that you believe have exemplary school councils?

2. Are there any additional comments that you have that would help me better understand your thoughts on school councils?

I spoke with five individuals and typically, each of these conversations lasted approximately ten minutes. While the term "exemplary" was questioned by some of the participants, I articulated to them characteristics of "exemplary" school councils as defined by the literature. According to the research, exemplary school councils provided parents with true advocacy situations whereby they functioned as integral parts of the school performing such tasks as voting on committees, mobilizing other parents to become involved in educational affairs, and monitoring changes which occur in the school (Bloom, 1992; & Epstein, 2001). This information helped me obtain some probable research sites. I then met individually with the principals at both schools and attended an educational governance meeting at both locations to obtain permission from both the parents and principals to begin my research.

The Case Studies

According to Anderson (1998) a case study typically involves the collection of multiple sources of evidence that includes documentation, file data, interviews, site visits, direct observation, participant observation and physical artifacts. The data collection techniques that I employed included interviewing and direct observation.

Examining the context of educational governance meetings was of utmost importance as I began my field research. I spoke with the principals of the schools to obtain background information about the school's community, personnel, goals of the organization and the histories of the school councils. I also reviewed documents that the principal and parent members were willing to share. For example, school newsletters, recent annual reports of the school, written mandates of the school council and summaries of the proceedings at past meetings helped me understand the complications, subtleties and contexts of the organization.

Interviews

Since conversation is one of the basic modes of human interaction, I chose semi-structured interviews to help me share in the understandings and perceptions of others regarding their involvement in educational governance. According to May (1993), the method of initiating and maintaining a conversation with the interviewee constituted the fundamental premise of an interview. He contends that, unlike the more controlled structured interview, a semi-structured interview encourages respondents to answer a question in their own terms, unconstrained by the pre-formulated ideas of the interviewer. Thus, concludes May, a semi-structured interview enables more qualitative depth. Berg (1998) further suggests that semi-structured interviews are like "chit chat" in that they allow the researcher to gain additional information about various phenomena by asking questions that do not follow a rigid, set schedule. In sum, Berg contends that semi-structured interviews allow the researcher to develop a predetermined set of questions, but the interviewer is also given the flexibility to digress and ask questions that arise from the interview process itself. This allows the interviewer to grasp new information and use it to pursue new directions.

To obtain participants for this study, I provided the principals at both schools with an overview of the research project to be presented to the parents prior to me attending the educational governance meetings. After receiving approval from the parents to conduct this research, I presented my research interests to both groups and asked for volunteers. All participants were provided with a summary sheet of the research proposal including a brief commentary about related ethical issues, and were invited to participate in the research. A sign-up sheet was passed around the table so participants could write their name and phone number if they wished to participate in the study. All parents involved in the educational governance meetings at both schools signed participation consent forms indicating their willingness to participate in the research. However, some chose not to participate in the interviews. No parent chose to withdraw themselves from the study.

In total, I interviewed seventeen parents and three principals during the period November 2004 to April 2004. A copy of the interview guide for parents and principal for Valleyview is located in Appendix A and the interview guide for parents and principal at Central Park is in Appendix B. Each interview typically lasted between sixty and ninety minutes and the interview guide served as the basis for the interaction. However, additional related questions often emerged and were asked which dealt with issues raised during the research inquiry. Each interview was tape recorded and subsequently transcribed. A copy of the interview transcript was returned to the interviewee along with a copy of the study's findings for validation of information.

I also chose to interview parents that had attended a minimum of four educational governance meetings since my intention is to examine how both groups operated and those participants were better acquainted with the dynamics of the meetings. Individual interviews were conducted at a time and location that best suited the participants. While the majority of the interviews were conducted at the participant's home, I also met with the interviewees at their workplace or at a coffee shop.

Observations

According to Yin (1994) direct observation involves making field visits to the case study site and taking notes as a passive observer. To get closer to the people in this study, I collected data for a six month period at both schools: November 2004 – April 2004 and attended all educational governance meetings at both schools during that period. In total, I attended eight meetings (four meetings at each site). I was primarily interested in directly observing the ways in which members participated in meetings and observed the following elements: topics discussed and their relative intensity, patterns of interaction, the influence of the principal at the meetings, and the roles taken by different parent members.

My observational inquiry followed the procedures as suggested by Merriam (1988). That is, I attempted to be relatively unobtrusive and put the participants in my study at ease. I found that at one of the research sites, where a meal was served prior to the meeting, I was able to develop a better rapport with the group since it yielded an opportunity to socialize with members. I found that this aided in developing a level of trust and openness with those who participated in the research.

The duration of each meeting varied from two hours to three hours between both sites. At one of the sites, an additional meeting was held relating to activities happening at the school. This meeting was not originally planned at the beginning of the school year when dates were established.

In this study, my role was officially that of non-participant observer. I observed each school council meeting intently, taking notes, remembering as much as possible, and then writing afterwards in as much detail as possible, what I have observed. Merriam (1988) claims that it is important to take notes during the observation to help grasp "motives, beliefs, concerns, interests, unconscious behaviours and customs of the individual" (p.103). To take good notes, she suggests that the researcher pay attention, focus on a specific person, interaction or activity mentally blocking out all other stimuli, look for key words in people's remarks, concentrate on the first and last remarks of each conversation and mentally play back remarks and scenes during breaks in talking or observing. She emphasizes that one must take notes on the setting, people and activities, the substance of what people say, and include observer comments which denote the feelings, reactions and hunches of the researcher. Observer comments can be identified through underlining, bracketing, or using the initials "OC" to distinguish them from the actual content of the observation. Where possible, I validated these observations during the interviews with the participants. Along with the tape-recorded interview data, my own observations added depth to the study and provided additional information about parental involvement in educational governance. These data, along with the recorded minutes of the school council meeting taken by a school council member, the agenda for the meetings, and school newsletters served as the data collected for further analysis.

Data Analysis

Having chosen the case study method to guide my research, the data gathering and analysis process were not separate phases. According to Merriam (1988), in case study research, data analysis begins with "the first interview, the first observation, the first document read" (p.119). Emerging insights and hunches often led to the next phase of data collection, which involved a reformulation of my questions. Therefore, I conducted some initial observations at the meetings and interpreted them before beginning the interview process. Analysis of the observational field notes occurred after each meeting. Participant interviews were analyzed towards the end of the observational period; however, each interview was summarized highlighting important discussion points upon completion.

To analyse the data I gathered through interviews and observations, I employed a pattern approach, which Lincoln and Guba (1985) refer to as an explanation that develops during naturalistic inquiry. During my analysis process, important and significant phrases, sentences, and paragraphs were initially identified, highlighted and labelled. Transcripts were read and re-read in their entirety to allow for the identification of themes and sub themes. Dominant themes or patterns were constructed inductively through a comprehensive examination of all the existing data. Information that did not seem relevant was extracted and moved to another file. This process resulted in multiple layers of codes that evolved and continued to evolve throughout the inquiry.

According to Miles and Huberman (1990), just naming or classifying what is out there was usually not enough. We need to understand the patterns, the recurrences, the whys. For both the interview and observational data, I coded categories of meanings that emerged and compared them across the transcripts of various participants and the field notes produced. After identifying patterns among the categories, I searched for deeper themes that linked the various patterns. Kaplan (1964) calls these "repeatable regularities." Neuman (1991) claims that the pattern approach is an excellent vehicle to reduce large amounts of data into a smaller number of analytical units, thereby disentangling a pattern of interconnected thoughts or parts linked to a whole. Thus the pattern approach was particularly well-suited for my study, since I generated large amounts of data. As Miles and Huberman (1990) claim, the pattern theory provided me with a means of continuous analysis during my collection of data, thereby ensuring that the study remained focused. Furthermore, this pattern approach helped me construct a cognitive map, an evolving schema for understanding what happened.

Beyond these approaches of interpretive analysis, I also subjected the data to a critical analysis working from constructs of the critical theory framework described in the preceding chapter. I went back through my data as well as my emerging patterns of interpretive findings, reading them through the lens of class and gender. My approach was to discern examples and possibly patterns resembling those described by Apple, Giroux and McLaren: exclusion of certain groups, dominance of middle class values and practices, and reproduction of societal structures of inequity in the school's own procedures and interactions. I also analysed the data using concepts I learned from Bourdieu, reading for evidence of particular cultural capital that produced advantages or disadvantages to particular participants in unfair ways. I was aware of treading carefully as I proceeded with this analysis. I did not wish to impose force on the data into pre-determined theoretical concepts. Therefore I checked and cross-checked my critical findings frequently with various data, worked with my supervisory committee to identify themes and also talked about these critical analyses with certain participants such as the school principals.

Trustworthiness

According to Merriam (1988), “all research is concerned with producing valid and reliable knowledge in an ethical manner” (p.163). Similarly, Lincoln and Guba (1985) assert that valid inquiry must demonstrate trustworthiness. This refers to a study’s reported findings having credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. These criteria are discussed in the following paragraphs.

Credibility

In terms of credibility, Lincoln and Guba (1985) contend that there should be compatibility between the constructed realities that existed in the participants’ minds and their representation. Credibility speaks to establishing truth in the research findings. This refers to any factors that enhanced the credibility of research, including prolonged engagement, persistent observations, triangulation, referential adequacy, peer debriefing, and member checks (Anderson, 1998; Lincoln and Guba, 1985; MacNealy, 1999; Merriam, 1988; Yin, 1994).

My field engagement was for a period of six months, which helped ensure the data saturation that Lincoln and Guba (1985) encouraged. Persistent observations were also used to enhance credibility. Merriam (1988) provides a checklist of things to observe while collecting data that I followed as much as possible. These include: the setting (observe the physical environment and the context within which action takes place), the participants (describe who is in the scene, how many people and their roles), activities and interactions (describe what is going on, the sequence of activities and how people interact with one another), frequency and duration (explain when the situation began and how long it lasted) and subtle factors (be aware of nonverbal communication between members).

According to Yin (1994), the use of multiple sources of evidence or *triangulation,* adds to the credibility of research. For my study, I used both non-participant observations and interviews to construct plausible explanations about educational governance.

According to Merriam (1988), peer debriefing is a useful tool to enhance credibility. This involves asking colleagues (outside of the context of the study) to comment on the findings as they emerged. For my study, I consulted with peers who were also pursuing doctoral studies in Educational Policy Studies at the University of Alberta to discuss methodology, data collection, analysis issues and matters of representation.

Dependability and Confirmability

According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), dependability refers to the ability of a study to reproduce similar findings if repeated with similar respondents in a similar context. Similarly, the authors assert that confirmability is the degree to which the findings are the product of the focus of the inquiry and not of the biases of the researcher. They also contend that both dependability and confirmability can be determined through a properly managed audit.

In my study, I kept a research journal as part of what Anderson (1998) refers to as an audit trail or chain-of-evidence, including meticulous records of all sources of information used, and notes of all communications, and reflective thinking activities during the research process. Anderson asserts that the purpose of an audit trail is "to record decisions made concerning all aspects of the research process as they unfold and demonstrate how the links and conclusions between the data and the analysis were derived" (p.134). The journal assisted in clarifying my thinking and observations as the study progressed. It also helped to guard against misinterpretations and the oversimplification of data.

Member checks also increased the confirmability of the study. According to Merriam (1988), member checks involve taking data and interpretations back to the people interviewed or observed and asking if the results were correct. In my study, I provided each individual with a copy of his or her own transcript to validate. I also presented them with themes I identified through the data analysis process. By sharing with participants my interpretations of the data, it allowed me to clarify, adjust, and probe further for additional information. As Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggest, this represented an ongoing process throughout the data collection phase of the research to clarify and verify interpretations.

Transferability

According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), transferability refers to the extent to which the findings can be applied in other contexts or with other respondents. To enhance the possibility of a case study's results being transferable to other contexts, Merriam (1988) suggests that the investigator ought to provide a "rich, thick description so that anyone else interested in transferability has a base of information appropriate to the judgement" (p.177). For the purposes of my research, I collected detailed descriptions of data and reported them with sufficient detail to allow judgments about transferability to be made by the reader.

Ethics

Before beginning my research, I obtained permission to conduct my study from the Ethical Review Committee of the Department of Educational Policy Studies at the University of Alberta. In addition, I sought permission from the large urban school district, superintendent and the school principals. I accomplished this through a series of personal conversations and written letters explaining the nature and purpose of the research and the ethical procedures. I also applied to the Cooperative Activities Program through the Associate Dean of Research at the University of Alberta. As well, I developed an oral presentation with hand-outs for the individuals outlining the purpose and nature of my research. This information was explained at the first educational governance meeting I attended at both locations. Since a few members were absent at the first meeting I attended, I talked with them individually at the next meeting.

To obtain interview participants for my study, I asked for volunteers at the meetings. I described to them that there were no foreseeable risks, explained the benefits that would result from the research, and apprised them of the voluntary status of their participation indicating that they were free not to participate, or to withdraw from the study at any time for any reason. I also offered to answer any questions they had regarding the procedures. To obtain informed consent of the participants in my study and permission for the secondary use of the data, I explained the aforementioned points on a paper consent form and obtained the signatures of all interview participants. As well, I explained to participants that their anonymity would be assured in the report. To ensure confidentiality, I reported data using pseudonyms and disguising identifiers of individuals and the school. I was the sole transcriber of the data. Raw data including transcripts, digital audio recordings and notes were securely stored.

Writing the Case Studies

According to Merriam (1988), writing a case study can be facilitated by "assembling the case record, determining the audience, selecting a focus, and outlining the report" (p.186). For this study, the case record was devised through the data collection process. This involved the assembly of interview transcripts, documents obtained from the schools such as newsletters, meeting minutes and agendas, observational notes, and journal entries.

It was intended that the primary audience for this report would be other educational researchers who are interested in examining parental involvement in educational governance. Particularly those who wish to explore the power dynamic of parental involvement and how it is manifested within the context of educational governance meetings. This audience selection was based on the desire of the researcher to report back to a key component of the educational reform under investigation and remain committed to the central concerns of the research questions. Due to the nature of the research questions in this report, the focus was predominantly thematic and topical.

According to Merriam (1988), the assessment of a quality case report is measured by considering alternative perspectives, providing a sufficient amount of evidence, and writing a complete and engaging report. In the next chapter, the case study for Valleyview Elementary School will be presented by including a detailed description of the school site and outlining the various themes which emerged from the data.

CHAPTER 5

THE FINDINGS: VALLEYVIEW ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

This chapter focuses specifically on Valleyview Elementary School. Findings are presented through themes developed originally from direct quotations of the participants and observations which I conducted at the school. Minutes from the meetings I observed and other related documents such as school newsletters, memos to parents from the principals, and staff handbooks have also been analyzed and incorporated into this presentation of findings. I have organized the findings into three sections: (1) an overview of the school and its school council; (2) descriptions of the various themes that I identified in analysis of the data; and (3) a general discussion of the findings.

Valleyview Elementary School: An Overview

Introduction

Throughout this overview, attention is given to developing the context of the case study based on indices of housing, education, and occupation of school council parent members in the Valleyview area. As a majority of the parent respondents at Valleyview had high levels of educational qualifications and held professional occupations within the city, this section emphasizes the factors that led to their involvement on the school council and explores the framework of the school council at Valleyview.

Officially opened in 1940, Valleyview Elementary School was built to accommodate 279 students from grades one to six. In November 2004, when this research was being conducted, there were only 168 students attending Valleyview with split classes in every grade except kindergarten and grade one. According to the principal, Mrs. Magee, this was primarily due to financial constraints imposed by the Province. Most of the children attending Valleyview were White[1] with only three percent of the school population being visible minorities, mostly of Arabic ethnicity. The socio-economic characteristics of the area were summarized by Mrs. Magee.

> This is a very affluent community where there is a high proportion of two parent families, clear evidence that children are coming to school well fed and clothed, with high educational expectations of young children. Many families have the luxury of the dad being the one that works in a high paying job so the mother, although well-educated, can spend most of the day helping out at the school. Many mothers choose not to work for paid employment. Most students at this school come from business or professional families within the Valleyview community.

Surrounded by a wide expanse of green grass and constructed with stucco and timber, the building's exterior structure blended with the neighbourhood's distinct architectural character, reinforced by building codes. An extensive playground containing swings, a sand box, several slides, and monkey bars were located directly east of the school and this was utilized by many students on a daily basis, weather permitting. The main office sat on the south side of the school by the main entrance and provided an obvious starting point for school visitors. A desk topped with in/out mail trays, a fax machine, and a computer formed a seamless working space for the school secretary. Directly ahead, a door and window opened into the principal's quiet, self-contained office. Mrs. Magee had been the principal at the school for nearly two years and previously served as principal at a school in a poor area of the city prior to her appointment at Valleyview.

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[1] The use of the term "White" throughout this research is not meant to construct categories of people based on visible differences nor is it intended to accord privilege to white people. The capitalization of the term interrupts the tendency to presume 'whiteness' as a norm against which other groups of visible minorities are cast as Other. In fact, visible minorities and aboriginal groups were noticeably absent in the school councils in this study although they were strongly present in the general school and parent populations of at least one school.

School context and study participants

At Valleyview, I interviewed a total of eight participants which included seven parents (of a possible fourteen parents who attended the meetings) and then-principal, Mrs. Magee. Of the parents interviewed, five were men and two were women: George, Chad, John, Jerry, Rex, Cora and Kim. All parents interviewed were involved in the school council at Valleyview for a minimum of two years and were representative of the population served by the school in terms of high income levels. For example, three of the seven parents interviewed were lawyers, while the others consisted of a stock broker/real estate investor, a university professor, a professional staff member of the Alberta Government, and a general labourer.

Their homes, where most of the interviews were conducted, tended to be large two-story houses with rather lavish interiors. The neighbourhood surrounding Valleyview Elementary School was quiet and comfortable with manicured, landscaped, well-maintained yards. I was told by one parent that many homes in this neighbourhood had sold for about $325,000[2]. Within close proximity to each other, the participants' homes where I conducted most of the interviews strongly indicated that these families enjoyed a comfortable, even affluent standard of living.

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[2] According to a report released by the Edmonton Real Estate Board on May 4, 2004, the average residential selling price (including single family, condo and rowhouse sales) in the city in April was $178,777.

The Valleyview School Council

This section will explore the composition of the school council, election procedure of school council members, and general activities which took place at the school council meetings. Within these subsections, there are clear indications which suggest that a structured atmosphere permeated the school council's existence at Valleyview.

Composition of the Valleyview school council

At Valleyview Elementary School, the structure of the school council closely resembled the general outline for school councils as mandated by the Alberta Government. The executive committee on the Valleyview school council consisted of a Chair, a co-Chair, a Secretary, a Treasurer, a Key Communicator representative, a teacher, and the principal. These members were present at all the meetings I attended and formed the core of the school council. However, parents who did not constitute this core would also attend. Of the four meetings I attended at Valleyview, there were some different parents at each of the meetings although five "non-core" parents were present at all the meetings. At Valleyview Elementary School, the parents involved on the school council adequately reflected the demographic make up of the school community. For example, according to Mrs. Magee, with 95% of the school population being White, all parent members on the school council were White with the exception of one parent who was a visible minority. As well, the school council members were representative of the community served by the school as most parents were employed in professional/managerial occupations within the city. Only one parent member of the school council was employed in non-professional or trade work. The executive committee of the school council consisted of seven individuals and, typically, seven additional parents would attend the general school council meetings for informational purposes and to provide input. In total, six women and eight men comprised the makeup of the school council meetings. The Chair was responsible for planning the agenda for meetings, facilitating the meetings, acting as a spokesperson for the council, and generally supervising the council. At Valleyview, the Chair was a man who happened to be the only visible minority person on the council. The co-Chair helped construct the agenda for the meetings with the Chair and, in the absence of the Chair, assumed the duties of the Chair. The co-Chair was a woman at Valleyview. The Secretary, another woman, was responsible for keeping accurate minutes of the meetings, taking care of all correspondence and communication, and keeping up-to-date lists of the names and addresses of school council members. The Treasurer, a man, was the financial representative for the school council and was responsible for keeping track of the monetary transactions, chairing the financial committee, presenting an account of the funds to the members at school council meetings, and preparing the accounts for auditing. The Key Communicator representative, also a man, acted as a liaison between the school council and the school district.

Mrs. Magee, the principal, was also a member of the school council and was responsible for establishing the school council, ensuring that a collaborative, collegial approach to decision making was undertaken at meetings, assisting the council in its operation, and promoting activities deemed to be important by the school council. Informal conversations with consultants in the school district indicated their perception that the Valleyview school council constituted an exemplary example of school councils within the school district, although some commented that parents on the Valleyview school council were "more vocal" in terms of their educational demands than other school councils. That is, these district office consultants considered the parents at Valleyview to be "professional" in their interactions with the school and indicated that these parents were "well-informed" on educational issues. However, some also believed that the parent members on the school council at Valleyview were "outspoken" critics of the educational system, compared to other school councils within the school district.

My personal experiences from attending the Valleyview school council meetings complied with these observations. I sensed a very formal, professional structure with clearly defined roles and expectations from the members of the council. As well, parents often challenged the principal, school trustee, and a member of the legislative assembly on curricular, pedagogical or budgetary issues.

Election of school council members

School council members at Valleyview were elected by a democratic voting process. According to George, an establishment meeting was held at the beginning of the school year. At that meeting, parents indicated their desire to run for the positions of Chair, co-Chair, Secretary, Treasurer, and Key Communicator representative. With no objections from other parents, the executive committee was formed. Members could remain on the executive committee as long as they had students enrolled at Valleyview and were re-elected. Executive committee members were to be elected at the Annual General Meeting, usually held in October, by any parent with students currently attending Valleyview Elementary School. At least one teacher from Valleyview was a member of the executive committee on the school council and was elected by the school staff. However, the number of voting teachers at the school council meetings was not to exceed the number of parents. Typical of other school councils within the school district, there was one teacher, a woman that served as an executive member on the school council at Valleyview. A community member selected by the school council was also supposed to form part of the executive committee and was usually an individual who had an interest in the school. However, at Valleyview, there was no community representative present at the meetings I attended.

According to the School Council Handbook (1995), where a school is a senior high school, at least one student enrolled at the school must be an executive member of the school council and must be elected by other students enrolled in the school. Valleyview, being an elementary school, was not required by government legislation to have a student representative on the executive committee. However, at two of the meetings I attended, a small group consisting of four different students from the school were present for the first fifteen minutes. They provided school council members with their thoughts on a journaling activity taking place at Valleyview to keep track of memorable experiences and, on another occasion, thanked the school council members for subsidizing a field trip.

General school council activities

The school council at Valleyview met monthly in the staffroom on the main floor. However, meetings also occurred across the hall in the school library when a larger area was needed to accommodate special events. For example, at one meeting, a Member of the Legislative Assembly representing the Valleyview Community spoke about the funding of public education in Alberta and referred to recommendations made by the Learning Commission to address class size, special needs, fitness initiatives, and aboriginal issues. The members gathered around tables and discussed issues outlined on an agenda prepared in advance jointly by the Chair and co-Chair. At the meetings I attended, the tasks of the school council followed a distinct sequence which included the principal's report, the Treasurer's report, a volunteer report, the Key Communicator's report, and the co-Chairs report. Considerable time was allocated to the Treasurer's report discussing monetary concerns at all meetings.

There were typically five Key Communicator meetings per year held downtown at the Centre for Education which dealt specifically with best practices for education. For example, some meeting topics included the role of the school council within the school district, successful stories from the instructional focus initiative, teaching in the 21st century, promoting the school as a community partner, and defining high quality education. Each meeting typically lasted for two hours and provided an opportunity for Key Communicators from various schools to voice their opinions regarding current events occurring within the district and receive information and ideas on ways they could involve parents in the educational process promoting further partnerships. Many Key Communicator meetings also featured school trustees that added considerable insights to the discussions and sought parental opinions on educational matters. The Key Communicator group that met monthly downtown at the Centre for Education was different from school council meetings as it provided information on issues occurring within the school district as opposed to school council meetings whose agendas were particularly site-specific and mainly dealt with individual school-related concerns.

The school council at Valleyview was not a fundraising body. However, a not-for-profit organization at Valleyview referred to as the Parent Teachers Association (PTA) was responsible for raising funds that were to be spent on student enrichment opportunities. Interviewees informed me that the PTA was an entirely separate body from the school council, yet the representatives on the PTA were the same representatives on the school council and ultimate control and decision-making powers with respect to funds raised by the PTA rested solely with the school council.

As evidenced in the previous discussion, the school council at Valleyview consisted of parents who were actively involved in the school at the general school council meetings. At these meetings, the members displayed a considerable knowledge of the educational process and familiarity with public meetings, which was significantly influenced by their level of education or related work experiences. These parents shared a feeling of responsibility for their children's education and this motivated many parents to become involved on the school council at Valleyview.

Parents' incentives for joining the school council at Valleyview

Parents who participated on the school council at Valleyview appeared to have very clear and wide-ranging ideas about why they were involved and commented about wanting to be involved in academic and non-academic issues at the school. A strong theme which arose throughout the interviews suggested that they were very concerned about their children's education and simply wanted to be as involved as much as possible in the process. For example, some saw themselves as contributors to the quality of education their children were receiving at the school. As Cora stated,

> I joined the school council because I wanted to have some input into what was going on at the school. A couple of my friends who have older children at the school told me that this was a good way to get involved because they talk about educational matters. At the last meeting, journaling was discussed and that has been a real hit with my family. My son and I do this every night now before he goes to bed and I would not have received this information if I was not involved with the school council.

Kim indicated that being on the school council made her feel as if she was investing in her child's education.

> The school council meetings fit into my schedule because they are during the evening and I feel as though my voice is being heard at the meetings and valued by the principal. That's why I go. I'm here for my child and it makes me feel as though I am a part of his learning.

Other parents said they were motivated to become involved on the school council by specific school related issues, such as split classes and playground rules. As George indicated,

> I decided to get involved this year because of all the teacher cut-backs. At Valleyview, we suffered from this because except for kindergarten and grade one, the whole school has split classes. Last year was the turning point

> when we knew that the school would not be able to keep every grade separate. This was my main reason for becoming a member of the school council because there needs to be more parent advocacy. Parents need to stand up for public education or who knows what will happen next.

Unsatisfied with the nature of school rules, Chad indicated that he became involved with the school council at Valleyview to have a voice in matters pertaining to the school about which he had concern, such as the school's zero tolerance for 'rough play' on the playground:

> I became involved for self defence. It was basically that I wanted to show my involvement in the school and there were a couple things going on at the school that I didn't agree with. The main concern I had was about the playground rules. I had already talked to the principal about this before and I didn't want to see these rules just go to the school council and get ratified. I wanted to pose some opposition towards it. I don't like the no contact rule that Valleyview implemented…the rules were too strict and too strictly enforced so I was hoping on raising the idea that a certain amount of rough play was acceptable as long as it was mutually agreed [upon] by both students.

John stated that he became involved in the school council at Valleyview to send a message to the educators and administrators at the school that he was very concerned about the health and welfare of his special needs child hoping his involvement on the school council would result in extra attention given to his child at the school.

> I always say that you get a lot further with sugar than you do with vinegar. I guess I wanted to become involved primarily because I think it's the right thing to do, to be involved in your kid's education but I have particular issues that are pertinent to the school. My eldest child is an insulin dependent diabetic and there are areas that I thought I needed a closer interaction with the school, self-interests I guess. She absolutely needs to eat at certain times and we've had instances at the school where she was not getting a snack or getting it late and the difference of 15 or 20 minutes can cause major problems to the well being of a child. I had concerns about that and I also had issues with Sarah in terms of her reading level. I feel that the

> care and comfort I get from the school may be enhanced because I'm more involved with the school council. All the teachers know my name at the school and know of my daughter's situation so I suspect that doesn't hurt.

Jerry claimed that he became involved because of his respect for teachers and the administration at Valleyview. With his own wife being a teacher, he felt that he was in a position to speak to the hardships currently facing the school district which included limited financial resources, increased class sizes, and a decreased level of staffing.

> I go there to protect the principal and the teachers and make sure that the parents don't brow beat them to death. Some of them don't know the politics involved in running a school and I do because my wife is a teacher. To give you an example, some things from the school council last year irked me. Like this $30,000 the school council earmarked for books and the council gave the principal spending power of up to $30,000 to buy instructional resources but at the last minute in June the chair decided that he wanted to see some of the materials and that pisses me off… I missed that meeting or I would have *gone absolutely crazy*.

Dissatisfied with the ways in which some parents attempted to control the school council meetings Rex claimed that his involvement deepened over organizational concerns about the school council itself, and he developed a goal of making the gathering more democratic in nature.

> At first I went to the meetings because I have a child at the school and I was interested in knowing how the school was being run. I went there and I was appalled at the way the organization was run. I didn't feel it was being run in a manner that it should be run. I think there were certain things that the school council was required to do and that these things weren't getting done or that they were being done by one or two individuals without the council knowing. One thing that concerned me was that there were some legal requirements that weren't being met and it didn't seem that participatory to me. The general organization wasn't being run in a businesslike manner.

These findings indicated that school council members at Valleyview had wide-ranging motives for becoming involved. Some were motivated by a general desire to improve the overall quality of education for all children at the school; however, others focused on single issues. What was interesting about these reasons for parental involvement on the Valleyview school council was that parents' comments all indicated a personal vision that they had for the school, and most had a generally high level of confidence in voicing their opinions. For example, they did not become involved to serve as passive implementers of the school's agenda or principal-generated school incentives. Instead, underpinning their impetus for becoming involved was an active intention to make a difference in the school's operation, and to have a voice in decisions. Regardless of the motivations behind their involvement, as the next section suggests, the school council at Valleyview consisted of informed individuals who were instrumental in helping establish, maintain, improve, and question educational practices.

Valleyview Elementary School: Themes

This section reflects the experiences and perspectives of the respondents related to their participation in school council activities at Valleyview. The section is organized into five themes that I identified throughout an interpretive analysis of the data. These five focus on issues that struck me as particularly unique about Valleyview, or that were communicated to me by participants with emphasis on frequency. The titles of the themes reflect the participants' own words: (a) The next phone call I make is to the CBC Radio: Strong parent voices; (b) Money Talk: A financial forum or a school council?; (c) Valleyview cliques: The rules of the game;

(d) The dedicated principal: A key to school council success; (e) Gendered role separation: Men as leaders in school governance and women as volunteers around the school. Together, these themes help capture the diverse nature of parental experiences of their involvement in education at Valleyview and provide a useful outline of the forces that shaped participation.

The next phone call I make is to the CBC Radio: Strong parent voices

In this section, I will discuss several events which occurred at the school council meetings at Valleyview that attempted to position parents as equals, if not superior, to those in charge of the everyday operation of the school: notably the principal, teachers, a school trustee, and a local MLA. Parents criticized the actions of the school trustee and the local MLA, expressed their disdain for changes made by the principal to the traditional Halloween celebration, questioned the placement of their children in split-classes, and felt that the principal did not adequately use their professional expertise. These parents challenged educators: many indicated that they had higher educational qualifications than the teachers and principal at Valleyview. As the comments in this section suggest, most parents did not defer to educators as authority figures on pedagogic information and knowledge, holding legitimate power over educational decision-making or being capable of self-regulating what was best for the students.

When I observed the school council meetings at Valleyview, I was surprised by the fact that parents were quite vocal and appeared to have no reservations about speaking up publicly, asking questions, and raising concerns about decisions that were being made at the school by the teachers and principal. My observational notes revealed several instances where the parents spoke frankly and openly challenged proceedings at the school council meetings, even when special guests such as the local MLA made presentations at the school.

For example, at one meeting in which a school trustee presented information on upcoming severe budget cuts for schools within the school district, one parent reacted strongly to the grim news by questioning the role of the school trustee within the educational organization. Another parent asked the trustee if she would be willing to resign from her position if the funding situation did not improve.

At another meeting, the principal Mrs. Magee requested funds from the school council to allow her to partake in a three-day research presentation in the United States. This research was conducted by Mrs. Magee and a fellow colleague and would have showcased instructional innovations occurring at Valleyview. This resulted in a rather lengthy discussion with the end result being a vote taken amongst school council members to not provide the principal with funding to attend this session.

In addition to these incidents, there had been a longstanding tradition of having a full-day Halloween Celebration for all the students at Valleyview. This entailed students dressing up in Halloween costumes and having a non-instructional day of fun activities such as a penny carnival, games, and candy treats. However, when this research was conducted, a collaborative decision had been made by the teaching staff and principal at Valleyview to simplify this Halloween tradition. Instead, it was proposed that the school hold an afternoon of storytelling in the library with treats given to students at the end of the school day. A notice was sent home from the school to parents indicating that on Friday, October 31, Valleyview Elementary School would be hosting a presentation from staff at the school library entitled, "Scary Stories to tell in the Dark". The rationale for this break in tradition, indicated in the notice to parents, was to preserve precious curriculum time and focus on brainstorming, questioning, and student written response techniques. Mrs. Magee described her rationale to me:

> Traditionally, Halloween was an afternoon of chaos at Valleyview. After a lengthy discussion with staff, their feedback indicated they wanted a much more structured program where children continued to be instructed, yet a slight flavour of Halloween could be evident. We had agreed to tone the "partying" down as the unstructured Halloween event wasted an entire afternoon of school. I approached the school council and discussed the staff concerns. We had developed an alternative plan where the theme of Halloween would be integrated into the curriculum with scary stories in the dark being an activity they would have been involved in. We agreed, for the last fifteen minutes of the day, we will pass out treats. The recommendation was that the students not come dressed in their Halloween costumes as they took sometimes an hour to put on (make-up and special effects). With some of the graphic costumes, we found it inappropriate to wear those in school.

Clearly, Mrs. Magee and her staff were not content with the way that Halloween celebrations had occurred in the past at Valleyview and sought to implement change, using the authority of the school staff to shift the focus of the Halloween celebration, and hoping parents would accept the change. However, comments made by parents during the interviews revealed their disappointment for changing the Halloween tradition. Kim was so displeased that she seemed to have ignored the alternate plans of scary stories to be told in the dark,

> I absolutely couldn't believe my eyes! I received this notice from the school one day which pretty much said that Halloween was going to be passed by this year with no fun activities for the kids. I was outraged! Sure the curriculum time is precious and everything but they are kids and all kids are supposed to have fun on Halloween.

John placed full responsibility for the Halloween change on the principal with no acknowledgement that the decision was made collaboratively by the school staff. He resorted to threat:

> The principal cancelled Halloween and so except for the kindergarten class there was a moratorium on Halloween parties and typically the classes have done a penny carnival something around Halloween and made a day of it and the principal decided NO. I called Mrs. Magee right away and said the next phone call I make is to the CBC Radio and let them know you are the Grinch who stole Halloween.

Expressing nostalgic memories of childhood, Chad linked the Halloween dispute to larger issues of motivation, curricular balance, and the meaning of childhood:

> Growing up, I remember the Halloween and Christmas parties. Those were the most memorable times when I was in elementary school. I think that we are asking the kids to work hard but having fun and being a kid is also important. There needs to be a balance and I was really disappointed with the whole ordeal at Valleyview. Sure, time is precious but all of life skills need to be learnt.

George even commented on conversations he had with other parents around the school regarding the change in Valleyview's Halloween tradition and he also indicated that students were expected to complete an overabundance of homework and they needed to have an opportunity to simply have fun at the school. He felt that the break in Halloween tradition removed an element of 'fun' from the school that elementary school children should experience.

> There were a lot of frustrated parents around the school who were saying that they work with their kids ten hours a day doing homework and there is no pressure valve. Kids need a pressure valve, they need to let off steam every now and then. Halloween wasn't nearly what it was in previous years and there were a lot of upset parents who challenged the teachers and principal on it.

With the hopes that ghouls and ghosts would not be locked away in the closets of Valleyview Elementary School on Halloween, some parents and students escalated the issue to a public protest. According to Mrs. Magee, this entailed a sizable gathering of parents and students in front of the school making their presence known.

> I had a riot out in front of my school. A few days before Halloween we were all eating lunch in the staff room and we hear this chanting outside the school. "WE WANT A CARNIVAL. WE WANT A CARNIVAL."... the whole school is outside K-6 and they are chanting with probably about forty parents in the audience. I have about 200 individuals outside the main entrance of the school just staring at me and chanting.

Comparing this Halloween protest to Alberta teachers' labor rights and resistance, Jerry stated that actions of the principal and staff were somewhat hypocritical,

> I was disappointed to hear that the children at Valleyview were in hot water or the leadership of the school was disappointed in their ingenuity to hold a rally on their lunch hour to show how unhappy they were with not getting their Halloween party. I wonder where they get the idea of the rally from? If I remember correctly, teachers rallied at the legislature when they went on strike a couple years ago. Are our children in hot water for freedom of speech?

The Halloween experience at Valleyview signified some parental resistance to principal control and indicated that parents were not willing to respond as subjects of the principal and solely assume a supportive role in the relationship. As well, the parents apparently expected involvement in program changes such as this, however apparently minor. As no parent indicated that they understood the problems generated by the traditional Halloween celebrations that Mrs. Magee was concerned about such as the loss of curricular time, and the "chaos", communication between the home and the school may not have been as comprehensive as it should have been. Nonetheless, the parents' dramatic reaction and the swift escalation of the incident were surprising, and suggested a lack of trust and cooperation between school council and principal.

In addition to the Halloween incident, parents also questioned the decisions made by the principal and staff at the beginning of the school year when it came to allocating their children in split grade classes. Although Mrs. Magee had completed a considerable amount of research on the issue of split-grades and consulted with an educational expert on the issue, parents did not automatically accept the school staff's placement of their children in the lower or higher portion of a split grade. This was important because it represented another instance whereby parents challenged the decisions made by educators at Valleyview and demanded accountability for their actions. Rex, for example, was unsatisfied with the split class his child was placed in and felt that he should have been more insistent in his demands to have her switched to another class.

> When I found out that my daughter, who is in grade three, was placed in a two/three split, I was upset and concerned. She is a bright young girl and I hated the fact that she was placed in the lower of the two grade levels. I went and talked to the principal about it and the principal, she is a nice person but I didn't get any satisfaction and now the class is a mess. The kids do not know what is going on in the class, the desks are a mess and there is no control. I should have went further with the issue and regret not doing so now.

Speaking to the task of implementing split grade classes at Valleyview, Mrs. Magee indicated that this was not a straightforward process as parents did not like the idea in general and challenged the placement of their children within the split grades.

> I wanted to ensure that I had outstanding programming for these students because of the high expectations that are brought forth by parents. I also have a community that is very strong-minded about what they want. Split classes is one thing that comes to mind right away because [parents] didn't want them at all as they hadn't experienced them in ten years. They also said that if there were going to be split classes, they wanted their children put where they wanted their children put… I have many parents who just don't let up and I've tried to help shelter my staff as much as possible. I don't want to paint a negative picture of my parents because they are really supportive with helping out around the school but they are persistent in ensuring we know what their wants are.

Mrs. Magee evidently felt pressure from the parents of Valleyview to satisfy their individual demands regarding their child's education. It was noteworthy that Mrs. Magee also felt she needed to protect members of her staff on occasion from parents.

My interviews with parents also revealed an instance during the previous school year at Valleyview where a school council member questioned reading materials that Mrs. Magee was planning to purchase and wanted to review the books before funds were allocated to the principal to buy them. This was important because it suggested that certain parents considered themselves to be more knowledgeable about curricular materials than the principal. As well, John expressed doubt about Mrs. Magee's abilities to make financial decisions at the school and felt that she could utilize parental resources in a more effective manner.

> I have a strong background in budgeting and one of my core competencies is managing cash flows, managing budgets, and essentially cutting budgets where you need to and I don't want to be in a situation where I am interfering with the principal but I've often said to her that if you want me to have a look at the school budget from a critical eye... There is a MLA, a

> journal correspondent, a communications consultant from downtown, bastions of the medical community, bastions of the business community, you name it. I feel those resources are not being utilized as well by the school as they could be and I don't know why.

John apparently felt that the principal should have enlisted the support of parents when making school-related decisions that fell within their realm of professional expertise.

As indicated by the preceding discussion, the parents who participated on the school council at Valleyview attempted to exercise considerable power in the everyday activities of the school. Whether protesting the Halloween event, expressing dissatisfaction for split classes and student placement within those classes, challenging the principal's selection of reading materials to be purchased for the school library, or questioning why the principal wasn't utilizing professional parent expertise more effectively, there was strong evidence to suggest that the parents involved in the school council at Valleyview demanded accountability from the principal, and inclusion in school decision-making. As many parents appeared to be very aware of what was happening at Valleyview, their comments denoted the high expectations that they placed on the learning institution.

Money talk : A financial forum or a school council?

This section will explore the Valleyview school council's preoccupation with raising funds for school activities. As a means of generating revenue for the school, parents interviewed indicated that they preferred participating in casinos despite the moral issues associated with such a controversial form of fundraising. The parents' resources enabled certain fundraising activities that would not be possible in a less affluent area such as the annual event to auction off student art to the highest bidding parents. The comments about fundraising made by parents also suggested a blurred understanding of the overall purpose of the school council, as some believed it existed to raise and allocate money to school activities.

According to the School Council Resource Manual (1995), a school council is not a fundraising body for the school. Instead, a school can have a not-for-profit society which may have the same executive committee as the school council but must have separate bylaws and keep separate minutes. At Valleyview, the not-for-profit organization was referred to by school council members as the Parent Teachers Association (PTA). The executive committee for the PTA consisted of the same members who were on the executive committee for the school council. For example, John claimed that while they were technically two different and distinct bodies, there was very little evidence suggesting that they functioned as separate entities.

> Well there's technically two separate organizations and only one does the fundraising but its officers and directors are the same officers and directors of the school council and what we do is hold the meetings simultaneously with one set of minutes so everything that's done for one organization is done for the other organization.

At the school council meetings I observed, a significant amount of time was devoted to discussing financial concerns and future fundraising initiatives. For example, at one meeting, the local MLA was present and discussed educational recommendations made by the Learning Commission. Explaining that public education was the number one priority for the Government, the MLA attempted to comfort the school council members by saying that the budget allocations for schools would adequately address issues pertaining to class size, special needs, fitness, and aboriginal issues. With the conclusion of his presentation, parent members on the school council immediately questioned him regarding the government's willingness to commit extra funds to public education. As Kim exclaimed, "There simply needs to be more money! My kid's education is at stake here. I am prepared to be vocal to get the extra funding. My kid is in a split class and I want the money now. I will continue to fight for it now."

At another meeting, the local school trustee informed the school council about the educational funding plans of the school district for the upcoming school year. Considering the budget allocation to be quite limited, the trustee set a very gloomy tone to the meeting and looks of frustration and disappointment were expressed on the faces of the school council members as they received this information. When the presentation ended, parents began to question the school trustee about monetary concerns: one parent even asked the trustee if she had brought her chequebook to the meeting. Once again, the discussion focussed primarily on money-related issues with the remainder of the meeting being spent addressing an outline of the school budget that the principal had prepared for the school council members for viewing. Here, two parents were very critical of the number of dollars that had been allocated towards the photocopier and suggested that this was extraordinarily high.

The interviews with parents revealed that some believed that the purpose of the school council was to allocate and raise funds to the school. As Rex claimed,

> I really think that the school council is a conduit of money for the school. The school council at Valleyview raises somewhere in the region of $50,000

> a year that is largely at the liberty to be spent in the school. I feel that we are there to conduit money into programs that are supplementary to the school.

Karen expressed similar views when asked about the purpose of the school council claiming that they were responsible for supplementing the educational programs at the school by providing additional funds.

> We are basically there to subsidize the field trips and help get stuff for the school. I think we gave the school almost $2000 to help cover the trip to the Bennett Centre. I'm not sure but I think we bought about $30,000 in materials for the classroom this year and we helped buy computers for the school library. All that money came from the school council.

Adding to this, Jerry stated that the purpose of the school council was to provide for the "extras" that the school might not have otherwise.

> The purpose of the school council, I think, is to make the school unique. We've got a kiln at the school that was funded by the school council. That helps bring out the individual nature of the school that might not be at other schools. The art program is excellent here because we were able to buy this for Valleyview. If it wasn't for the fundraising we do here at the school, I don't think that our school would be as special.

To help raise extra funds to supplement educational activities at Valleyview, all school council members that were interviewed favoured a specific means of generating revenue through a lucrative source: casinos. Chad provided an in-depth account about how the casino process worked:

> All casino operations are essentially operated on a for profit basis which means that part of the proceeds from casinos are distributed towards charities. The parent advisory group at Valleyview is a registered group with Alberta Gaming so every two years or thereabouts we have a casino and it is two nights where we provide a total of 36 volunteers to do menial tasks at the casino for unpaid labour. We then share in a pool of earnings that the casino has made and our gain when we did it last was just over $70,000. I've done two casinos for the school and the process is very simple. You go to the Casino and it is usually a Friday and Saturday night for about six hours

> each night and I've worked in the counting room. You go there at 10pm and stay there till about 4am and count money. There is nothing to it. The school supplies the labour for operating the casino for that weekend and over a three month period, the earnings are averaged out to all the charitable organizations that helped out at the casino. So when you think about it, we made $35,000 for the school in one night. That's a good return for the investment if you ask me.

Kim indicated that the monetary gains for the school from one casino were substantial.

> I worked from 9 in the evening till 3 in the morning and in just one weekend we earned $70,000. They bring the average out of the casino over three months and you even get a percentage of what is made on the slot machines. I think it is an excellent way to make a lot of money for the school in a short time. It fits into my schedule.

Rex expressed a strong desire to work at the casino as opposed to other methods of fundraising such as bingos. Evident in his comment was also a notion that bingo was not an appealing venture for someone of his social positioning.

> I absolutely refuse to work bingos now. I've done a bingo before and I will never do another one again. They are foul things, just foul, foul things. Have you ever heard of bingo brain? Have you ever been into a bingo hall? The smoke is awful! I did a bingo once and someone told me to wear my worst clothes so I went in with old clothes on and I was one of the best dressed people in the room including the players and it was the worst four hours of my life. The $150 we made was pathetic and if I'd known then what I know now, I would have just written the cheque myself and went home. It was a waste of my time and I wouldn't submit my lungs to it again. I would have paid someone to do it for me but I wouldn't want them to subject their lungs to it either.

Aside from the complaints about bingo smoke, no parent complained about the larger issues of working casinos: supporting gambling addiction, or raising money through the exploitation of particular social groups.

Going door to door asking neighbours within the Valleyview community to buy chocolate bars was also cited as an undesirable means of raising money for the school by John.

> Fundraising is an absolutely essential part of the school council's role overall and the school council should give money to the school but I am really against selling chocolate bars or going from house to house to ask for money. I don't think that we should nickel and dime people to death. I find that this form of fundraising is quite intrusive and I don't like asking my friends for money to support the school. They pay taxes too and parents should not be expected to canvass the neighbourhood to provide money for school items. I will not do that anymore.

This reluctance to generate school funds through one's friends is interesting when compared to the lack of concern about generating funds from casino-goers.

Reflecting the affluence of the community, another means of generating money for the school was through an annual art fair. The principal, Mrs. Magee provided a description of this event.

> We have an annual art fair once a year at Valleyview that brings in anywhere between $3000 and $5000 in a two hour timeframe. What happens is all the artwork that the kids produce over the year goes on a silent auction and our parents coordinate the event. The art teacher chooses a piece of art from each child in the school and unless a parent opts out, the piece of artwork will be auctioned off. The school is transformed into an art gallery.

Not surprisingly, parents indicated that they preferred forms of fundraising that took the least amount of time and generated the highest revenues. For example, when this study was conducted, the Valleyview school council had a total of $74,911 in its bank account, the majority of which had been obtained from volunteer work at the casino. The school's need seemingly outweighed potential concerns. As Chad commented,

> I feel sorry for the people who are spending their pay cheque at casinos every day but I am also reaping the rewards since my son is getting a better education.

Karen noted,

> Some parents thought that [casino money] was dirty money but we quickly got over that philosophical debate when we found out how much we can make for the school through the casino.

At a school council meeting that I attended, the question was raised by a parent member whether or not it was within the purview of the school council to give some money raised from the casino back to the community in an effort to acknowledge the hardships caused by gambling. For example, the suggestion was made that students could undertake a project to help a less fortunate group. A brief discussion ensued and the general consensus was that the school council hadn't budgeted for this. However, if they chose to, they could. No further comments were made about this issue at subsequent meetings I attended. Nor did any parent acknowledge the relatively powerful position of Valleyview in terms of being able to generate far more funds than schools in less affluent communities.

Volunteer reports, Key Communicator reports, co-Chair's reports – all were on the school council agenda for every meeting that I attended at Valleyview. However, "money talk" seemed to take precedence over everything else. While most of this talk was initiated by the parents, at least half of the total time of every meeting I attended was spent discussing funding and fundraising concerns: funding requests made by the principal, Alberta Gaming regulations, and the Treasurer's report. In light of the educational budget cuts within the school district, it was clearly evident that many parent members on the school council were particularly concerned with funding cuts.

Valleyview cliques: The rules of the game

This section examines the fragmentation of parents on both the school council and as volunteers within the school. The interviews indicated that specific factions of parents were apparent at Valleyview such as the 'Fathers of Valleyview" which consisted of some of the men that formed the executive committee of the school council and another group of women volunteers that assisted with the coordination of school events such as art fairs, school plays, and classroom helpers. The interviews also revealed that some parents felt the need to be cautious about what they said at the school council meetings as they thought that upsetting the status quo could have negative consequences for their children. In fact, one parent indicated that this was the main reason why some of his parent friends chose not to become involved on the school council at Valleyview. This research also presented a barrier to parental involvement in schooling as some parents indicated that the prevalence of cliques of parents at the school and the childish games they played prevented them from becoming involved in future school activities.

Evidence from interviews with parents and observations conducted at Valleyview suggested that parents who participated on the school council were part of a relatively small core group at the school. Some of these members felt that they benefited from relationship development as a result of their participation. As Kim indicated,

> You know, I've made new friends since I became involved with the school council at Valleyview. I think that's important.

John claimed that his involvement on the school council at Valleyview resulted in the formation of a social group that met on a monthly basis.

> As a group, we get together once a month. We compare notes (laughs). No, seriously, we unwind and have a beer. We call ourselves the 'Fathers of Valleyview'. It has become popular with a few of us and it is entirely a social event where a few fathers get together and we might talk about the school but mostly it is about whatever topic comes up. It's an ad hoc group and if you can make it, good, and if you can't, it's still good. No pressure whatsoever.

Describing this activity, Jerry commented that this was his night to relax away from the home and catch up on all the latest news.

> I am a proud member of the 'Fathers of Valleyview'. I rarely get an evening out with the guys so this is nice. It's basically a time for us to sit around, enjoy each other's company, and have a beer. An email goes out to all the guys a couple days in advance and we meet at the pub.

However, Chad, who participated at the Valleyview school council meetings, claimed that he had never received an email to participate in this social group and commented that he often felt as though he was looked upon as an outsider at the meetings by other members.

> I've heard about the group of fathers that go out for beer every now and then but I never received an invitation. I don't know, it seems as though when I bring up an issue at the school council meeting, nobody pays any attention to it. On a couple occasions the Chair has cut me off and I don't feel that he should have the right to do that. I have children at this school and I have a voice just like everyone else. People who are the official whatever of the school council, they use their positions as Chair, co-Chair, or Treasurer to control the conversation.

This suggested that Chad felt excluded from this group. His comment reinforced the notion that executive members on the school council may have more power and authority than other parents who chose to become involved in school activities.

My observations at the school council meetings confirmed this viewpoint. On one occasion, a suggestion was made by Chad recommending that the school council take a more proactive and possibly controversial stance in light of the insufficient funds being allocated to schools. He suggested that it would be more effective for people to protest by going out into the streets and knocking on the doors of the legislature rather than writing letters which, in his opinion, was an 'antiquated and fundamentally useless' approach to initiate change. After making the proposal at the school council meeting to get the government's attention by getting people into the streets, a silence filled the staff room at Valleyview Elementary School. I noticed a few parents smile at each other: no discussion ensued. Instead, the Chair emphasized the importance of going through the appropriate channels as a means of expressing their displeasure and that letters to the Premier of Alberta, the Minister of Education, and MLAs were being prepared by the co-Chair outlining educational concerns.

Similarly George, when asked if certain members on the school council at Valleyview had more power than others, referred to a term he coined as the "Valleyview Rules". He believed that the parents who held positions as the executive members on the school council had considerably more power than other parents at the school. For example, when asked to define what he meant by "Valleyview Rules" he gave the following description:

> It's the rules of the game, but these rules have a built in inequality but you could say that part of it is earned. Some of these people, you have to be a

> well known person or whatever. You have to be volunteering around the school so that the principal and teachers feel that you are putting in your time. Being an executive member on the school council is part of the virtues of the school and they are going to get certain privileges for their kid because that is part of the deal. I think these parents get first choice or first consideration for various things around the school, they probably have a greater voice in things than other parents. It probably affects who gets picked for this or that and who gets picked to perform this or that and who gets pushed for this or that or who gets a little bit of extra attention from the teacher. As part of "Valleyview Rules", participation on the executive committee on the school council translates into power which sometimes also translates into other opportunities for your kids. I don't know if that is conscious on the parts of people doing it but I think that it must be. I think that certain people who are on the executive committee at the school council meetings have a particular agenda just like someone being in politics.

Adding to this perspective, Rex claimed that he was sometimes fearful of raising topics at the school council meeting as it could possibly translate into negative consequences for his daughter at the school.

> Some of my friends refuse to get involved in school councils because they find that it involves arguing with other parents over things and they suspect that it will have negative consequences on their kids at school. I am a very open person and I sometimes worry that if I am argumentative with the teacher or principal at the school council meeting… in the end, if they have a bad attitude towards you, it could translate into a bad attitude towards your kids. I think that I'm fairly easy to get along with and that I'm fairly friendly so I hope it doesn't translate into any bad feelings. I am very conscious of how they view me at the meetings.

Although not specifically related to the school council at Valleyview, another example arose in the interviews by Kim acknowledging the presence of an exclusive group of parents at Valleyview. Being an active volunteer at the school and member of the school council, she thought that the issue of power was more prevalent amongst volunteers partaking in everyday activities at the school than at the school council meetings. She stated,

> There is a volunteer "in" crowd and a volunteer "out" crowd and then there is a crowd that doesn't volunteer. Certain parents, it seems as though they are involved in dreaming up all these different volunteer projects such as the "publishing bee" and the "art fair". It seems like the in group is a group of women who are all friends with each other and they ask each other to do things on these different committees and I find that if you are not in *the know* and in the *in* crowd then you don't know about these things… The play that they put on for the kids, unless you are in the "in group" you don't know about the rehearsals. So it's like a clique. They are all friends and they go out for coffee together all the time and they all do yoga together on Friday mornings.

Speaking about a bad experience she encountered as a parent volunteer at the school, Karen expressed her belief that a small group of parents at the school yielded considerable power which made participation for her at Valleyview undesirable at times.

> There were situations where there was a lot of power involved and little fun. Like the art fair. One small group of parents, the clique, took on the majority of the project themselves and I suggested making little art cards that we could sell so it involved taking pictures of children's art from K-6, putting them into the computer and printing off these little art cards using the kids' art and putting on the back "in support of Valleyview school" and then we could sell them in packages of fifteen. Well, four or five people in the clique who have been involved with the art fair over the last four or five years thought that it was a bad idea except the art teacher who thought it was a great idea and the principal thought it was a great idea… so we went ahead and did them ourselves and on the night of the art fair there were two different tables set up. There was the clique on one side of the library and then there were three of us on the other side of the library. It was like the clique wanted no part of our project. Now, I feel as though I want no part of doing that again because it causes too much trouble and I want to stay away from this whole power thing.

Another childish incident that occurred at the Valleyview Christmas Concert was explained by Jerry.

> I know that there are several parents at the school that do not get along with each other. Someone was telling me yesterday about the school Christmas concert performance that happened last year. Apparently certain parents,

> who do a lot of the work at the school volunteering, would go in and save chairs for the winter concert performance ahead of time by putting their coats on them. For a seven o'clock performance, some parents would go in and put their coats on the chairs after school so that they could get front row seats. Anyways, I heard that one parent showed up at 6:45pm and wondered who all the chairs were saved for. Let's just say there was an exchange of words between parents with one saying, "you can't save seats at the winter concert", and this was followed by another parent saying, "sure I can, I have my coat on it" and she said, "No, you can't come in ahead of time and save seats like that." So what happened was this parent took the coats off the chairs and sat down with her family so this other parent was really mad and said, "No, these are my seats" and the other parent said, "Tough luck because I am sitting here. Just because you volunteer here every day doesn't mean that you own the school." So it must have caused quite a ruckus because the school sent home a notice this year saying that you cannot save seats this year and you cannot go early and save seats.

Similarly, Rex expressed discontent about hearing his wife talk about the clique of parents at Valleyview that controlled a substantial amount of the volunteer programming at the school.

> She says that it is always the same people in charge of everything and I wonder how they are always in charge. There was a school play and I don't know how this all evolved but some parents decide when the rehearsals are and when the meetings are and what the scene is and when and where. When decisions are made, they are always made by the same people and apparently there are a handful of them that have ultimate power in school regarding volunteering. They did this play for the students, a three little pigs kind of thing, and the wolf was played by one of them and that person was also the narrator. My wife said to me, "who decided that she was going to be the wolf?" and apparently she was the narrator as well. There were other parents there who wanted the role of the wolf and when this was known, the clique shut them all down saying, "no no no, that person is going to be the wolf." You know, I am really surprised with the stories that my wife brings home, well, not really surprised I guess because I am used to it now. I guess that childish would be a more accurate word to describe all this.

Clearly, some participants found Valleyview school to have an exclusive and unwelcoming atmosphere. As a result of some parents attempting to control school events such as the annual art fair and privately selected individuals for school plays or other parents meeting monthly as an exclusive group for beverages as "The Fathers of Valleyview", it was obvious that some parents were so firmly entrenched in their positions at the school that it may have ultimately served to keep newcomers out. At Valleyview Elementary School, a subtle expression of social boundaries was the existence of cliques. This research also revealed that the cliques at Valleyview drew boundaries between groups that excluded others. Creating tension between parents and unwarranted stereotyping, this information highlighted the need for the principal, Mrs. Magee to help smooth parental relations and bridge the divide created by cliques and cultivate a more welcoming atmosphere between parents.

The dedicated principal: A key to school council success

This section examines Mrs. Magee's style of leadership on the school council. As evidenced from the conversations with parents, Mrs. Magee was well-liked and used the school council as a vehicle to try and make collaborative decisions at the school with input from parents. Although a previous section noted parental discontent with the way that the Halloween celebration occurred at the school, parents generally favoured Mrs. Magee's leadership at Valleyview. This indicated that the Halloween event may have been an isolated incident which upset parents and was not representative of her overall leadership style at the school. Addressing topics such as school discipline, organization for instruction, and home-school links, Mrs. Magee sought information from parents that helped her to make informed decisions.

My observations at Valleyview indicated that Mrs. Magee assumed a major role in facilitating the operation of the school council. For example, at all the meetings I attended, she was often called upon by school council members to provide clarification on issues or pass judgements. On many occasions, Mrs. Magee provided her thoughts on the report completed by the Learning Commission, suggested areas where money should be allocated by the school council, modelled activities that parents could do at home to extend their child's learning, and involved students in the school council meetings to showcase work being done at the school.

Speaking about her experiences as a principal at another school within the district, it became apparent that Mrs. Magee focused on connecting with parents and finding common ground upon which to build a school council.

> Before coming to Valleyview, I was a principal at a significantly different type of school in response to socio-economics. My responsibilities included providing supports for the general health and safety of children. Many supports for those families were not in place as many of the parents struggled and worked 2-3 jobs to maintain their families. We provide the students with a solid education and also found that we need to support our families with parenting sessions during the evenings. Often meals would be provided to the families during these evenings and they were greatly appreciative.

Displaying her willingness to become involved in the school council at Valleyview, Mrs. Magee claimed that involving parents in educational decision-making was important since they brought valuable information to the discussions.

> I treat our school council meetings like a classroom. You have a number of parents that have considerable talents and I think that they are generally respectful of each other. You must provide for the range of needs that come to the meetings, everyone having their own agendas. Our meetings incorporate many aspects of our program and I really enjoy getting

> constructive feedback and I think my role is to provide some instructional leadership to my members. I model certain things that I think are important such as journaling at home, the field trip to the Bennett Centre, math game night, and reading sessions. I think that it is important to provide these strategies to parents to reinforce what is happening in our classrooms. If there is something that's really significant, it is my responsibility to share that information with the school council and hear their feedback. This is their school as much as it is mine.

This indicated that Mrs. Magee thought school councils were important as she believed parent members brought valuable knowledge and personal experiences to the meetings. Such mutual leadership was considered favourable by school council members. As George stated,

> Getting all the voices heard at these school council meetings requires strong leadership. I think that this is an area where the principal and the Chair are very effective. We have reason to trust and respect each other at the school council meetings and I think that the principal sets this tone at the beginning of the year. The Chair gave a presentation about the purpose of the school council and the principal backed this up by emphasizing the point that everyone is to respect each other and learn from each other. That was the standard that was made clear from the beginning.

Similarly, Kim commented about what she perceived to be an effective style of leadership displayed by the principal.

> My children have attended a number of different schools so I have considerable experience dealing with several principals. In my opinion, the best principals are those who work at developing a genuine relationship with parents and the community served by the school. At Valleyview, parents expect the principal to tell the truth about things going on at the school and not to hide difficult issues. I think the principal does a great job in informing us about the school's vision and she always connects daily occurrences at the school to the larger goals of the school.

Rather than focusing on what the principal can do *to* or *for* others at the school, Jerry indicated that the school council at Valleyview resembled a community where shared decision-making was the norm.

> If I could use one word to describe the school council meetings at Valleyview, it would be community. I think we are a close web of people in there who don't refer to ourselves as "I's". What you see at these meetings is a collective "We". I know that there are times when things get a bit out of hand as people have differences in opinion but I believe that decision-making is a very reciprocal process at Valleyview as the administrator, teachers, students, and parents are all given opportunities for input.

Both the meetings I attended at the school and the interview with Mrs. Magee strongly suggested that team building did not take place separately from the activities conducted at the school council meetings. Mrs. Magee indicated that she did not consider herself as the leader of the group, but viewed her role as a member of the school council fully participating in activities conducted during the meetings and learning collaboratively with the group. Believing that the school council was a classroom for learning, the principal gained valuable insights from the group and was committed to partaking in the adventure of shared leadership. However, given the dramatic conflicts experienced by parents at the school, there was an apparent disjuncture between Mrs. Magee's views of trusting and communication and those of the parents. For example, with the previous evidence of struggles experienced by parents at the school, some obviously felt that there was a lack of communication and trust between school council members.

Gendered role separation: Men as leaders in school governance and women as volunteers around the school

At Valleyview, the school council meetings were largely dominated by men. This section examines the gendered nature of parental involvement at Vallevyiew and asserts that men and women fulfilled different roles at the school. Primarily due to work commitments, fathers said they were unable to be at school during the day to assist with their children's education. However, comments made by parents also revealed that activities such as helping with art projects, making crafts, and photocopying and laminating materials for teachers distinctly appealed to women and this was seen as their role at the school. The mothering role at Valleyview was quite explicit – they assisted in a voluntary capacity supporting tasks that needed to be completed at the school during the day. Fathers, on the other hand, indicated that their role at the school was to assist with educational decision-making during the evening.

Upon observing the school council meetings at Valleyview Elementary School, I was struck by the fact that executive positions on the school council primarily were held by the men. At all four meetings I attended, there was a dominant men's presence which significantly outweighed women's voices. For example, at one meeting which featured a presentation by a local government official of the Valleyview community, men on the school council led the discussion after the presentation with women participating mainly as listeners and observers. On other occasions, when important decisions were being made, I noticed that parents in attendance at the meeting would defer judgement to a man by looking at him and await his response before providing individual input. For example, at the meetings I attended, the men were the first to provide input on many issues and were often the first members to pose questions to guest speakers or ask for clarification on issues. These individuals also typically held managerial positions within the city.

Of the seven executive members on the school council, one woman incidentally served as Secretary, rarely spoke, and functioned solely as a note taker for all the meetings I attended.

Parents indicated that they were satisfied with the various roles they served at the school; however, the interviews revealed that there was a strong division between the sorts of tasks completed by men and women. For example, Kim provided the following explanation,

> I don't think that the men feel welcome at the school volunteering. They probably feel as though it is a hen party. I know that's the way my husband feels. If you look at the types of things done by volunteers at the school such as laminating, photocopying materials for teachers, cutting out art projects, or making crafty sorts of things, I don't think that many men would be all that interested. Besides, the men are at work all day and the women are the ones at home so many of the women have nothing else to do with their time.

Karen offered a similar perspective claiming that men were the primary breadwinners for the family and work commitments prevented them from being involved at the school during the day.

> The Valleyview community is a different neighbourhood than other parts of [the city]. It is certainly a more affluent area. Here, there are a lot of women that do not work because the husband makes a lot of money and the women probably only work part time, if they work at all. For that reason, I think that's why you see so many women volunteering during the school day and more men involved in the school council during the evenings. It fits their schedule.

Fathers interviewed shared similar views. Many believed that it was the women's role to volunteer in the school during the day and Chad emphasized traditional gender role expectations in his remarks.

> The mothers are vastly more involved in the school during the day than the fathers. Anyway, there's a lot of mothers in the school that are stay-at-home moms so they have the opportunity to be around the school more often during the day. Personally, I am gone to work in the mornings before my kids go to school and my wife does all the fetching and carrying most of the time so maybe that's an element. She sees it as her role to help out at the school during the day and be involved as much as possible.

As well, John acknowledged a gendered division of labour while explaining why school council meetings were underrepresented in terms of female parents. Here, he claimed that a man's work for paid employment was more tiresome than a woman who volunteered at the school all day.

> I know that this is probably a gross overgeneralization but I suspect that women tend to be more involved in their child's education than men. Most of the men at Valleyview work during the day and most of the women stay at home. Most of the men come home from a hard day's work and they just pass out. I'm actually surprised that there are so many men at the school council meetings because the man works and the women clean the house and take care of the child's education. That's just the way it is and I'm sure it's like that in most places.

This evidence suggested that types of parental involvement varied according to gender at Valleyview Elementary School. Participation on the school council was largely viewed as the fathers' domain, while mothers were primarily involved in volunteering at the school during the regular school day. This information reinforced a gender divide reproducing inequalities between the sexes in terms of parental involvement.

Valleyview Elementary School: Discussion

This section will summarize the main findings of this case study and will discuss issues across the themes, presented in subsections. The main issues addressed in this section include the attempts of parents to influence and control decisions made at the school, the cautious leadership style of the principal to engage parents in educational decision-making, yet stand firm on issues that she felt was in the best interests of students, the existence of a powerful clique of parents that established the rules for parental involvement at the school, the lengthy discussions about money at the school council meetings, and the gendered division of labour which existed in terms of parental involvement.

We want it our way: The impact of parents

Distinguishing between the relationships that working class and ruling class families have with schools, Connell et al. (1982) posit that ruling class families have organic relations with schools whereas those of working class families are predominantly inorganic. According to the authors, ruling class families critically challenged educational personnel in their study as the average parent of a student at a private school was at least the social equal, if not in a superior social position, to most of the school staff. Ruling class parents regarded teachers as their employees and rarely hesitated to inform the principal about what they thought was best for their children and possessed the ultimate power of withdrawing their child from the school if they were unsatisfied with the service. The Valleyview findings corroborated this research as parent members on the school council at Valleyview tended to be very critical of the general workings of the school. For some parents, assuming positions on the school council signified a powerful role as some attempted to regulate educational decisions being made at the school. For example, some would openly critique the work of special guests who attended the school council meetings such as the local MLA and a school trustee. Parent members also questioned the principal about financial matters concerning the school and, on one occasion, denied giving her funding to attend a professional development activity, protested the principal's decision to modify the Halloween celebration, and some expressed their dissatisfaction with the split-grade class their child had been assigned.

In particular, the latter example regarding split-grades indicated concerns about the impact of parent involvement on the general operations of Valleyview School. For example, rather than focussing on improving educational opportunities for all students, the split-grade issue highlighted the narrow interests of some parents in terms of parental involvement as their concerns were aimed primarily at gaining advantage for their own children. This finding is similar to Apple's (1996) contention that parental involvement in education may sometimes exaggerate educational inequalities as some upper class parents often attempt to influence the organization of schools as well as teachers' pedagogic styles and curriculum content.

Despite the policy initiative to expand parental involvement in schools by extending a voice to parents in educational decision-making, this research suggested that there may also be some negative consequences associated with parental involvement in schooling. As evidenced in the above discussion, some parents may have been driven by their own self-interests that benefited their own children as opposed to improving the quality of education for all students. As well, some parents may have felt that they possessed a better understanding of school-related issues than the principal. This placed unremitting pressure on Mrs. Magee as she claimed that parental involvement was both "good" and "bad" at Valleyview since she was appreciative of the volunteer support given to the school by parents. However, this came at the expense of considerable threats to her professional autonomy. Certainly certain parents exercised considerable power over the council activities for personal agendas. Similar findings were reported by McGrath and Kuriloff (1999) who claim that some upper-middle class parents may approach schools with narrow interests that only benefit their own children: trying to separate their children from those of lesser social status, securing for their children the highest proportion of educational resources possible, and dominating school council meetings. Similarly, Fine (1993) warns that focussing on individual advocacy without a commitment to the collective interest means that initiatives may fall prey to a concentration on individual families. She cautions that attempts should be made to avoid such a tendency and initiatives to involve parents in educational governance must focus on the collective aspects among all those involved.

However, parent-principal relationships at Valleyview were shaped by complex power relations. As Ball (1994) has argued, micro-politics of this sort are the bulk of a principal's job, and suggests that principals must both assert their own views and take full account of staff as well as all parents' views.

Principal leadership on the school council: A crucial role

Some literature strongly asserts that the principal is of paramount importance in shaping parental involvement in educational governance (Campbell, 1992; David 1994, Watkins, 1990). Together, these research studies reveal that principals whose leadership styles are collaborative and consensus building help to promote a welcoming atmosphere for parents to become involved in educational governance. At Valleyview, Mrs. Magee was instrumental in helping to promote the operation of the school council despite the occurrence of tantrums displayed by some parents, exclusive parent clubs at the school, and some uncertainty about what issues the school council had authority in. Providing professional advice to the school council members on financial concerns, recommendations made by the Learning Commission, and through modelling activities that parents could do at home with their children to extend learning, the principal held a prominent role on the school council.

At the school council meetings, Mrs. Magee served as an information provider for the parents on various educational issues and promoted a collaborative atmosphere in the group as opposed to having them function as a group of disparate individuals. The principal often used humor and laughter and displayed a deep sense of caring to encourage parents to become involved in educational decision-making at Central Park. From involving Valleyview students in the school council meetings to giving parents small gifts of appreciation for their involvement, Mrs. Magee invoked a culture of warmth and inclusion. I felt that her modelling of open communication and compassion may have helped unify the Valleyview school council, or at least ameliorate some of the more conflictual situations. This is supported by Campbell (1992) who encourages principals to mobilize parents' participation through frequent and meaningful home-school communication.

If parents' impressions were any gauge to measure the success of the principal at Valleyview, clearly Mrs. Magee enacted a collaborative style of leadership and attempted to build trusting, cooperative, and mutually supportive relations with parents. She employed a shared approach to problem solving, continually monitored her school council vision by means of feedback, and demonstrated that she was able to smooth various tensions which arose from the competing interests of parents.

While upholding collaborative decision-making, Mrs. Magee was also mindful of maintaining personal power to ensure that parental involvement did not affect the school in a negative way. She chose not to comply with parental requests for particular classroom placements and she challenged problematic Halloween practices despite parental outcry. In these ways Mrs. Magee engaged in what Ball (1987) refers to as 'arenas of struggle' in aspects of parental involvement, while maintaining a balance of power.

Inclusion and exclusion: Parent groups at Valleyview

The micro-politics among the parents at Valleyview were characterized by exclusionary cliques. Since this phenomenon did not emerge from a review of the literature, this portion of the study is helpful in illuminating this important aspect of parent relations at the school. Those men on the Valleyview school council who met as a private group appeared to limit membership to like-minded men in the community, and were able to form cohesive power blocs favouring their own interests on school council issues. Similarly power over school volunteer activity coalesced around an informal core group of women. Other parents indicated that these clique compromised group cohesiveness on the school council and inhibited the full involvement of all members. These parental cliques may have also undermined democracy. According to McLaren (1993), rituals sometimes occur in schools which serve to form or deform the identities of parents. Signifying forms of enacted meaning, McLaren's notion of 'ritual' parallels the Valleyview clique as it reinforced the dominance of certain individuals over others.

Despite the unwelcoming nature of the groups, some parents chose to participate on the school council at Valleyview because they wanted to be involved in decisions made at the school concerning their children's education and many felt that the principal strove to promote a collaborative atmosphere among parents at the school council meetings. Here, it is important to recognize that micro-politics do not always distort or disable the actions of school council members. While Ball (1987) posits that power and control may be used by individuals or groups within organizational contexts to manipulate outcomes and further their own interests, this is not always the case. The Valleyview parental cliques were powerful and exclusive, but the overall council retained a balance of power that protected a democratic space of reasonably open dialogue and decisions benefiting all students.

Finances dominating the meeting

According to Bourdieu (1984), the educated middle classes are more disposed towards and better resourced for engagement in the public sphere than other classes, particularly the working class. Their habitus, or set of internalized beliefs and principles that organize and guide social action, subsequently affect the practices performed by individuals. At Valleyview, it was evident that many parents, because of their habitus, valued economic capital. At the meetings I attended, very little time was spent discussing school programs and educational standards in relation to financial matters. Discussions surrounding the expenditures of money often dominated the school council meeting. In fact, some parents understood the purpose of the school council to be a forum to allocate funds to the school. This was significant because an overbearing emphasis on budgetary allocations undermined the general purpose of school councils, which according to the Alberta School Council Resource Manual (1995), should involve parents in multiple ways not including any attempts at fundraising. It is interesting that in her study of Alberta school councils, Ungarian (1997) found that despite this directive, councils' primary role of these organizations focused on fund-raising: Ungarian was critical of this tendency and argued for re-orienting councils to focus in more meaningful ways on educational matters.

In terms of generating money for Valleyview, parents were most interested in casinos. Most did not question the ethical and moral issues regarding casino revenues to support public education. Instead, they felt compelled to take advantage of the financial opportunities afforded through gambling. The issue also raises two questions: (1) What message does the education system send to children when it relies upon gambling as a way to overcome financial hardships? and, (2) How can gambling be good for schools if it is bad for families?

Valleyview is located in a high-income community and is capable of raising considerably more money than a low-income community. While parents at Valleyview could financially afford to make high wagers on art projects their children had completed, the same would not be possible where parents struggled to provide the basic necessities for their families. As well, through fundraising, school councils like Valleyview are undermining and removing the responsibility for government officials to provide adequate and appropriate funding for public education.

Comments made by parents about fundraising initiatives for the school and the preponderance of 'money talk' at the school council meetings provided testimony to the distinctive nature of high-income parents. For example, the parents at Valleyview sought to maximize the amount of money they could raise for the school through participating in casinos and chose not to support initiatives that resulted in little return for their investment of time such as bingos and door-to-door canvassing. That is, they had the freedom to choose which of a wide range of fund-raising options they wished to pursue. This illustrates Bourdieu's (1977) notion of cultural capital, defined as the beliefs, personal skills, knowledge, and resources that enable individuals to succeed. Overall however, the preoccupation with fundraising can have negative consequences as Dukacz (2000) reported that parents on various school councils in Ontario were worn out from doing fundraising that they had little time to discuss educational matters.

Believing that schools are not artificial, neutral organizations, Giroux (1988) professed that different vocabularies, power, concepts, and knowledge shape these institutions. At Valleyview, it was evident that the social positioning of parents attempted to shape the culture of the school. Parental focus on material things and fundraising at the school council meetings helped ensure that their own values would be reproduced.

Men and women: Different roles at the school

Despite an emphasis placed on generating revenue for the school, there was a strong gendered division of labour at Valleyview in terms of parental involvement. A sizeable body of literature has documented the gendered nature of parental involvement in education (David et al., 2003; Epstein, 2001; Lareau, 2000; Reay, 1998; Griffith and Smith, 1990, Standing, 1999). Together, these studies indicate that gender divisions are often present and affect parental involvement. The findings at Valleyview were no exception as a gendered division appeared to exist in parental involvement whereby women served primarily as volunteers for classroom activities and men exerted influence through school council decision-making. This gendering reinforced traditional conceptualizations of masculinity and femininity with mothers assuming a nurturing/educative role and fathers focussing on strategy and finance in public forums.

Within the school council, the executive positions and discussion were primarily dominated by men. Women (besides the principal) assumed more passive roles such as co-Chair and Secretary, and rarely spoke during the formal meetings. However women assumed the primary responsibility of volunteering around the school during the day. Recognizing the influential role women play in terms of parental involvement in education, Reay (1998) coined the term ‘gendered habitus’ to describe the division of labour between men and women. She posits that this concept illustrates a common view of the world whereby it is natural for women to be more involved than their male partners in their children's education.

At Valleyview, according to the principal, more women than men had the flexibility to partake in school activities because their husbands earned enough to allow them to do so. While this represents a conventional notion of gender roles, it was evident that women made considerable direct contributions to the school as volunteers. We see a reproduction of conventional gender roles with men earning large salaries and women choosing to work unpaid in the service of their children and the schools children attend. These mothers undoubtedly supported and enhanced the educational level of their children's school. The supplementary work that mothers did at Valleyview put their children in an advantageous position in relation to further educational goals. Thus, social positioning appeared not as something external, but as the conditions enabling the volunteer mothers to reproduce educational advantage for their children. Here, it is possible to discern how Bourdieu's (1977) concept of habitus captures the way educational advantage is passed on from one generation to another. If capital is transmitted over time, as Bourdieu suggests, children occupy an inherited social space that provides them with access to and acquisition of differential amounts of capital assets. By occupying the associated social positions, some women at Valleyview were able to play an active role in their children's education.

While Griffith and Smith (1990) argue that the gendered nature of parental involvement obscures the work mothers do in relation to their children's schooling, the whole notion of parental involvement presupposes the availability of time and knowledge of the educational system. At Valleyview, mothers had material resources and time to contribute. Although no single mothers participated in the interviews at Valleyview, it is plausible to assume that their participation in educational governance might be more difficult given their workload. In Mrs. Magee's admission that Valleyview school relies on parent volunteers to assist in extra-curricular activities, chaperone field trips, and assist in the classrooms, the implicit expectation that mothers' time is always available reinforces a dominant model of maternal involvement in their children's education, and possibly excludes some parents at the outset from core activities of involvement.

Despite mothers' support within the school, it is important to recognize that fathers were involved in the school, albeit in a different capacity than mothers. However, the overall patterns of mother's and father's participation reinforce Griffith and Smith's (2005) assertion that the mothering discourse assigns to women the major role in the work of sustaining their children in schooling. It is clear from this research that mothers' involvement in schooling often becomes homogenised into those of 'parents', a category seemingly free from gender issues.

Valleyview Elementary School Conclusion

What was striking at Valleyview was that the parents interviewed were very proactive. As indicated by the findings, Valleyview parents were critical of work being done at the school by the principal and teachers. They tended to demand involvement with working in areas such as budgeting and student placement in classes which were not within the purview of the school council. A parent-led protest on the school grounds, the prevalence of cliques of parents at the school, lengthy discussions of financial matters at the school council meetings, and gender separation in terms of activities completed at the school by men and women were important characteristics of this group.

The school council members at Valleyview willingly offered their time and effort in support of the school and closely monitored the work of the principal and teachers. They did not place their trust in 'expert systems' and, instead, considered them to be sites of challenge and scrutiny. In doing so, they attempted to personally customize the educational experiences for their children and did not always defer to the notion of professional expertise.

This strongly indicated that social positioning provided Valleyview parents with useful cultural and social capital that afforded them considerable power and voice in influencing school activities and decisions. Many approached the principal as a social equal or even subordinate. No parents indicated that they were intimidated by the school and their social location appeared to provide them with the confidence they needed to challenge or disagree with decisions made within the educational setting. While the principal maintained a balance of power and avoided becoming subjugated to the interests of the most powerful parental groups, she was continually challenged by these micro-politics. As is evidenced in the next chapter, the situation was very different at Central Park School.

CHAPTER 6

THE FINDINGS: CENTRAL PARK ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

This chapter focuses specifically on Central Park Elementary School drawing attention to the extent of principal and parental involvement in educational decision-making. As outlined in this chapter, Central Park opposed governmental mandates and did not establish a school council. Instead, they chose to establish a "Key Communicator" group which replaced the school council format and this served as their educational decision-making forum. The findings are organized into three sections: (1) an overview of the school and its educational decision-making body; (2) descriptions of the various themes that I identified in analysis of the data; and (3) a general discussion of the findings.

Central Park Elementary School: An Overview

Introduction

Built in 1908, Central Park Elementary School is situated in a downtown area where most students come from low-income families. (A low-income family is defined by the Alberta Government as one which often struggled to generate enough income to provide for the basics: food, shelter, health care, and the needs of their children). Of the 196 students enrolled in the school at the time of this study, approximately 30% were Aboriginal, 30% were Asian, 5% were African-Canadian, and 35% were Caucasian. During my interview with the principal, Mrs. Steingard, she asserted that the school had a 67% transiency rate during the 2002-2003 school year. She believed that this was primarily due to financial constraints. One example she gave was a family that arrived from British Columbia and sent their children to

Central Park for only three months. Because the family was struggling financially, they were forced to return to British Columbia and live with other relatives. The excessive amount of student movement in and out of the area, as families coped with multiple problems related to low or uncertain income, posed a challenge to enlisting and maintaining consistent parental involvement in the school.

The outside walls of Central Park were brick. The open schoolyard with its chain-link fence was relatively easy for outsiders to access. Beyond the fence in all directions were houses. Once inside, I immediately came upon an attractive display that read:

PARENT OF THE MONTH

Mrs. Smith has been an active parent at Central Park Elementary School ever since her children started attending Central Park. She has been involved with the Parent Council, volunteering on field trips, and donating her time in many other areas. This year, Mrs. Smith is actively involved in the EGGS Breakfast program and helps to serve breakfast and supervise children every morning. She is part of a team that helps many children start the day with proper nutrition. She has been a guest reader. She insures that her children arrive at school with home reading, homework completed, agenda books signed and permission forms returned on time. Jason, a grade 6 student, demonstrates that he has learned the importance of volunteering. He is also encouraged to pursue a variety of interests outside of school that fosters his curiosity and helps him to be a learner for life. Carla, a grade 3 student, demonstrates a desire to learn and try her best in her school learning. These qualities are reflective of how Mrs. Smith models for her children the value of education, learning and volunteering.

Thank you Mrs. Smith, for helping make our school a caring community and for providing the supports your children need to be successful learners.

In addition to this, a series of benches and several wing-backed chairs upholstered in a rich burgundy fabric offered seating to visitors outside the main office. A box of fairy tale books, and colourful paintings made entry into the school building friendly and welcoming rather than intimidating. Ample colourful displays of student work on the walls lightened the atmosphere of this old school building.

At the time of this study, there were 196 students and a teaching staff of seven for the preschool to Grade 6 program at Central Park. The rest of the staff was comprised of a principal, a curriculum coordinator/assistant principal, a mentorship program coordinator, four teaching assistants, one custodian, a school nurse, and a family therapist.

School context and study participants

At Central Park, I interviewed a total of twelve participants which included ten female parents with children attending the school (of a possible fifteen parents who attended the meetings), the principal, Mrs. Steingard, and a former principal of the school, Mrs. Sparks (both pseudonyms). In terms of membership on the educational governance body at Central Park, a core group of executive members did not exist as was the case at Valleyview. The governance meetings that I attended at Central Park often consisted of some different parents in attendance at each meeting, however, there were eight parents consistently present. Notwithstanding this diversity, the parents interviewed for this study had been involved in educational decision-making at Central Park for at least two years and were representative of the school population in terms of socio-economic location. One parent, Suzanne, was of Asian heritage, while the rest were White and born in

Canada. In terms of the educational backgrounds of the parent participants, six completed some vocational training after high school, three completed high school, and one did not complete high school. Employment varied: five were stay-at-home mothers, and the others were employed as an early childhood assistant, a secretary, a customer service representative at a car dealership, a hair stylist, and a teacher's assistant. Of the ten parents, nine were married and one had separated from her husband. Pseudonyms given to the parents interviewed for this study were: Suzanne, Roxanne, Susan, June, Maria, Amanda, Denise, Wanda, Kerri, and Jean. As well, Mark, John, and Edgar were three fathers that added their perspectives throughout the interviews.

Former principal's view of the school

While conducting my research at Central Park, I met the former principal who was replaced by Mrs. Steingard and she willingly volunteered to provide me with her experiences at the school. Mrs. Sparks served at Central Park from 1996-2001 and commented that when she arrived at the school, many parents felt that it was a bad place to send their children. With very little discipline, many children often got into fights and student behaviour was poor. Programs were limited and there was an overall lack of organization and order in the school. She explained the nature of the school upon her arrival:

> The school was a ghetto. It was hell. It was absolute chaos. The cleanliness of the building, the quality of teaching, it was pure hell. It caused me rage. My whole family went in to clean the building.

Adding to this picture, she discovered that the school had a budget deficit of $70,000. To compensate for a lack of fiscal resources, the principal sought the support of donors to help fix up the school.

> I found a business partner my first year at Central Park. They came in and installed wall paper in parts of the school for free. That was a big boost for us and made the school look a lot nicer.

As well, Mrs. Sparks introduced changes in the way the school was operating with an emphasis on making parents aware of how Central Park Elementary School compared with other schools in the school district.

> There was a room in the school where parents would just come to smoke. They weren't even parents of kids at the school. So I shut that down real fast! I was really hard with parents. I had to move them away from getting turkey's at Thanksgiving [from the school] to how can you help make sure that your kids are getting a good education. I just asked a couple parents one day if they would like to go out with me to supper at a restaurant close to the Centre for Education and then go to a meeting there. I wanted them to start asking questions like: Why do other schools have these extra things and we don't? And a few parents didn't like me trying to change the culture of the school. They were used to getting hand-outs. It was lots of work!

Since then, however, things have substantially changed at Central Park. When this study was conducted, the school had developed a positive reputation and all of the parents that I interviewed were very happy with the school and the education their children were receiving there. For example, Jean commented,

> To me it's an environment where my children are respected. My children are not angels, they cause trouble and my son has many challenges. But, there are wonderful opportunities for my children at Central Park to gain self worth. My son was involved in five or six different things this year like school patrol, school choir, he's taking cello lessons, he's on the chess club, he comes to the breakfast club. The opportunities for him to learn are just phenomenal. It's more than just education.

Echoing these sentiments, Suzanne stated that the school also provided children with many opportunities to win various materials.

> They have excellent programs for the kids. After school programs and the fact that they are all free is nice. They have a lot of sponsorship. Staples for instance donated a lot of stuff. Materials and school supplies and stuff like that. I.B.M donates a computer that is given away each month. One of the newsletters told us that they were giving away computers every month and we were like WOW! One time last year they gave away dressers. Really nice clothes dressers like these kids get awarded for all the good stuff they do which I think is amazing!

While it's apparent that substantial changes have been made at Central Park to improve the learning atmosphere for students, obstacles and hazards were numerous. Poor attendance rates were a major issue with Mrs. Sparks. Seeking to ensure that students were at school on time and ready to learn, she was tough on parents whose children were chronically absent for school. In the interview, she informed me that on several occasions, she resorted to going to the children's houses in the morning, getting them out of bed, dressing them, and bringing them to school.

As well, other factors influenced change at Central Park. For example, in an attempt to get more parents involved at the school, Mrs. Sparks created activities that were aimed at helping parents experience success.

> I started lots of craft sessions with parents. Everyone can do a craft. I am not a crafty person at all. They saw me do crafts and it really made them feel better about themselves. I'm just lousy at it! I always looked for that teachable moment. I also did a garage sale with the parents. I phoned people I knew to get donations and I taught them how to price, clean, and organize. I tried to do things that I thought they would be successful at and that's how it all began at Central Park.

Emphasizing mutual respect between the families and the school, Mrs. Sparks focussed her energy upon activities that fostered development. Coupled with an improvement in student attendance, an instructional focus on literacy, increased accessibility to resources and professional development for teachers, improved learning conditions, and the provision of support services for students, families, and staff, the educational fabric of Central Park Elementary School was substantially altered.

The Central Park "Key Communicator" group

At Central Park, the "Key Communicator" group served as a replacement for a school council and functioned as an organizational equivalent to the school council at Valleyview. However, Central Park parents indicated that they did not refer to themselves as a school council and were uninterested in formalizing roles such as Chair, co-Chair, Secretary, and Treasurer as did members of the Valleyview school council. In fact, the formation of the Key Communicator group at Central Park followed a distinct pattern.

At the beginning of each school year at Central Park, Mrs. Steingard would ask the parents if they were interested in forming a school council and the parents always voted against this. Instead, they wanted to remain as the Key Communicator group since this felt comfortable to them and they were strongly opposed to electing parents to various positions such as Chair, co-Chair, Secretary, and Treasurer, creating agendas for the meetings, and recording minutes. If they became a school council, they would have been required to fulfil these responsibilities and the parents found school council regulations to be too formal and unappealing.

Instead, as a means of providing parents with input into educational decision-making, Central Park Elementary School had a Key Communicator group which began in 1996. Initiated by Mrs. Sparks, a former principal at Central Park, to involve parents in educational governance, this group started by meeting monthly at a downtown restaurant, having a meal paid for by the principal, and then going to the district education building to participate in district-wide educational discussions. These district-wide meetings involved dialoguing with parents involved in educational decision-making at other schools within the jurisdiction.

It was not until Mrs. Steingard became principal at Central Park that a small change was made to the Key Communicator group. Instead of eating at a restaurant and going to the district education building to solely discuss district affairs, Mrs. Steingard decided that parents should also have input into educational decisions that were being made at Central Park Elementary School. This included looking at how parents could support the work of teachers in the classroom, support the fundraising efforts of school staff, and find innovative ways to help create the best possible learning environment for all students at Central Park. Meetings of the Key Communicator group at Central Park usually occurred once a month and coincided with district meetings held downtown at the district education building. For example, a typical Key Communicator meeting at Central Park started at 5pm with a supper meal served in the school staff room for all in attendance. At 5:30pm, the meeting began with a primary focus on discussing school related issues. Then, at 6:30pm, Key Communicator members went to the district education building for the district-wide Key Communicator meeting from 7:00-9:00pm. These district meetings consisted of topics such as school council training sessions, how to help your child read, or provided an update on Alberta's Commission on Learning. Often, the meetings began in a large group and then broke out into smaller ones pertaining to a ward grouping where parents discussed educational concerns with the school trustee. They served to keep parents updated about the school district, its programs, and its activities.

With humble beginnings, the Key Communicator group at Central Park evolved from solely being a district gathering of parents to a group that also served as a sounding board for the school. Typically, most schools had one or two parents that volunteered to be representatives or Key Communicators that relayed information from the district back to the school council. However, at Central Park, ten parents had volunteered to be Key Communicators. Membership on the Key Communicator group was completely voluntary and most parents had been part of this group for at least two years.

In addition to the Key Communicator group, many parents spoke at length during the interviews about various programs occurring at Central Park to involve them in their children's education. Interestingly, parent participants at Valleyview did not mention any such programs which extended beyond the realm of the school council. Given the strong influence of these initiatives on parents' experiences at Central Park, I provide extended description of the activities to provide important background for the later presentation of themes and parent comments.

DEP (District Education Project)

Facing declining enrolment and numerous families struggling with poverty and substance abuse, the District Education Project emerged to provide an improved focus on student learning and better support services for families. Central Park Elementary School was a member of the District Education Project. This initiative officially began in September 2001 and included roughly 1600 students at seven different schools located in the city's downtown core. With the main goal being to give students more opportunities to learn, the project involved an innovative collaboration that allowed several different schools to combine their resources, energy and talent, and offer enriched learning opportunities for all students. For example, full day kindergarten, no-cost school supplies for elementary students, increased counselling support for students and parents, extra professional development activities for teachers, and parent information sessions were just some features of this project that attempted to help ensure that students received the support and resources they needed for school.

Instead of different schools working in isolation competing for students, the District Education Project promoted collaboration between the schools. Commenting on the success of this initiative, Mrs. Steingard stated,

> The District Education Project is a connection of the work that brings us collaboration that you don't see in other places today. What we have is all the schools come together seven times throughout the year to do cluster meetings, so our grade one teachers met today across the seven schools, as well grade two, grade three, etc. and in that work they were looking at joint activities that they can benefit from. For example, our kindergarten teachers put together offer boxes and share those boxes with the other schools. Those boxes rotate from school to school and that's improved their resources and ability to collaborate with other schools.

By sharing resources, the principal believed that teachers were better able to understand the respective services available to parents and to share common interests in helping children and their families.

Parents also spoke highly of the District Education Project claiming that it had improved how the schools within the downtown area met children's needs. For example, Susan commented,

> I think the District Education Project is awesome. There's a lot of low income housing and low income families living in this area. The District Education Project has gotten corporate sponsorship to cover the costs of school supplies. There are no school fees whatsoever. Fieldtrips are almost always free. Once in a while they might cost $1.00 and if the kid doesn't have the dollar it doesn't matter. It seems to me that they go on a field trip once a week.

Roxanne explained that news of the District Education project prompted her to move to the Central Park area:

> I used to live in a different part of the city and we knew that Central Park Elementary School was sort of the model school for that project. Mrs. Sparks [the former principal of Central Park Elementary School and now chairperson of the District Education Project] is just this amazing person who can go out and get sponsorship for anything. She's well known for getting tons of free stuff for the schools. So we moved so our children could go to this school.

An evening outside the home with her children promoted this comment by June:

> They brought the yellow bus in to pick you up and take you down to the theatre. The tickets were donated by someone so we were just responsible for getting to the school. The bus would pick us up at the school. We went to another school and picked up families. There was a choir there at the theatre and there were pipe organs. It was an event that was open to the public so it just wasn't a show for the inner city schools. We were part of a larger community and that's the piece that I think is really important. It was

> an opportunity for us to experience that because I couldn't afford to buy tickets.

Despite the positive comments made regarding the District Education Project, however, Kerri was somewhat leery about embracing the collaborative nature of this initiative at first:

> My initial thoughts on the District Education Project were a little selfish. I didn't want to share the resources that Central Park had worked so hard to get with the other six schools. But I had to step beyond that and say if it's good for my children and good for Central Park children we want to make it good for other children and now I'm actually thrilled because another school that I wasn't happy with is part of the project to provide better education for other children. So when you look at it that way I think there's been wonderful opportunities for them.

Helping promote a synchronous education system within the schools, the DEP was generally viewed by parents as a positive experience aimed at dissolving barriers between schools and supporting a culture of openness and sharing. As the comments suggested, the District Education Project helped harmonize relationships and services between locations, brought in external donations to the school which subsidized free equipment and activities for the children, and assisted in connecting some parents to the larger community.

Storysacks

Another initiative to involve parents in their children's education was "storysacks": a collection of items such as stuffed animals, props, scenery, and characters that accompanied a children's book. Storysacks also contained supplementary materials such as a non-fiction book to accompany the story, reading tips and activities for parents, word or number games based on the story, and an audio tape of the story. Assisting families in engaging in literacy activities with their children, storysacks were handmade by parents and children, and were meant to promote multiple activities to bring reading to life and create a fun way for children and adults to read together at home. Explaining this initiative, Maria stated,

> It's where you take a book and you develop it into a sack so that the children all participate in the story. One was about a giant potato so the parent actually made the sack out of potato sack material. You may also have a story about a quilt so you may have a quilted sack to hold all of the things and everything about the story and around the story would be contained in this sack.

Involving parents in their construction, storysacks were enthusiastically received by many parents interviewed and served as a method of giving children an opportunity to sample different types of literature. They also encouraged parents to engage in a collaborative practice with the school as storysacks promoted reciprocal rather than one-way discourse between the home and school.

Home and school connection meetings

These meetings were essentially workshops for parents to learn ways to support their children in learning. These meetings were usually held at different times to accommodate the diverse nature of families. During this study, one home and school connection meeting was scheduled for 6:30pm and another was available for parents at 9am each week.

Home and school connection meetings typically consisted of approximately 25 parents and a guest speaker who was usually a school district consultant. Topics discussed at these meetings included understanding children's behaviour, "positive discipline", making storysacks, and discussing issues pertaining to the school curriculum. Parents influenced the topics as Wanda explained:

> It's about setting aside five or six different times a year when parents have the opportunity to become involved with learning at the school. What we did this year was we surveyed parents and said if you were to have a learning opportunity at the school, what would you like to learn about? So it could be about child behaviour, it could be on the school curriculum. There were some during the day and some in the evening, again to be as flexible and accommodating to families as possible. Parents very much determine what the themes are and what the presentation is going to be on.

Besides providing current information regarding school practices and parenting methods, the meetings also provided a regular gathering place for conversation among parents, accommodating different parent schedules.

EGGS (Eat Great Get Smart) Breakfast Club

Operated solely by parents of students who attend Central Park, the EGGS Breakfast Club was open to all students from 8:00 – 8:30 am from Monday to Friday. As described by Amanda, EGGS provided her son with a nutritious breakfast prior to the commencement of morning classes:

> EGGS has been really good for me. The best thing since sliced bread! I've noticed that Kyle has been less of a behaviour problem at school and his grades have gone up since he has been going there in the mornings. I don't know what it is but I don't have to fight with him to get him up in the mornings. He looks forward to it. Before, I had to drag him out of bed to go to school and he was late many mornings. It also helps me because I rush to get to work in the mornings.

This indicated that the EGGS Breakfast Club may have helped this child to concentrate better in class, it may have encouraged him to be on time for school since breakfast was prepared for him, and it definitely relieved some of the stress that his mother felt from being rushed in the mornings. It also provided parents who volunteered with an opportunity to demonstrate to their children, to the school community, and to themselves their commitment to their child's education.

Parents' incentives for becoming involved in educational governance at Central Park

Through face to face contact, principal Mrs. Steingard developed structures and strategies that systematically embedded collaboration into the daily life of the school. This directly influenced one parent's incentive to become involved in the Key Communicator group. As Denise explained,

> I made a conscious decision to become involved in the Key Communicators group because of the principal. When I first came to Central Park, I went through some personal trauma... but the principal made me feel at home and for me, it's all about giving back and forth. It's a wonderful honour to be recognized so when you get that acknowledgement and thank you, you feel like next time you're asked to do something you're more willing to contribute.

Apparently the principal's "personal touch" motivated this parent to become involved at Central Park. Kerri, parent of a special needs child, spoke about her dislike for fundraising emphasized at a previous school. A broader scope of involvement opportunities motivated her to become involved in the Key Communicator group at Central Park. According to Kerri,

> I was on a parent's advisory committee in British Columbia and there was a lot more fund raising stuff there. At Central Park, it's more about things that are happening at the school, about things that parents would like to see happening at the school. At Central Park, I was welcomed into the classroom or to go on field trips.

For Suzanne, impetus to become involved in the Key Communicator group stemmed from a sense of responsibility and having something to share.

> I feel as a parent of these children that it is my responsibility to become involved with the school and assist the school in as many ways as I can, not just for my children but also assist other children in the school. I think especially in this community a lot of those children have difficulties and I can be of assistance. I think that I do have some knowledge.

At Central Park, parents expressed diverse reasons for becoming involved in the Key Communicator group. For example, a caring principal, the perceived openness of the Key Communicator meetings, emphasis on programs rather than fundraising, and a genuine desire to help children served to motivate the parents to participate in the Key Communicator meetings.

Central Park Elementary School: Themes

Both Central Park and Valleyview school were very different institutions. At Valleyview, parents who served on the school council were very demanding and critical of the general operations of the school. As the principal indicated, she devoted considerable time to manage parental involvement and be responsive to parents. However, Central Park parents revealed discernible reluctance about challenging the principal on educational issues. They did not communicate any concern about the school's expectations of student achievement and seemed content leaving the principal with full educational decision-making power. The Key Communicator meetings at Central Park frequently involved safety and welfare issues such as dealing with parking problems around the school, how to prevent unwanted guests from entering the building, and addressed student behavioural concerns. Compared with Valleyview parents, Central Park parents appeared less focussed on funding issues.

This section reflects the experiences and perspectives of the respondents and has been organized into the following themes: (a) Parental involvement at Central Park: The good and the bad; (b) Leadership at Central Park: the power of the principal; (c) We're not a school council: A strong desire to keep things simple; (d) Gendered parental involvement at the Key Communicator meetings and at the school in general. The definition of parent involvement in schooling as a woman's responsibility was often conveyed in the language parents used: mothers, when talking about involvement in their children's education often referred to 'I' instead of 'we'; one father indicated that educating their child was specifically the mother's responsibility. These four themes bring together many issues yielded in the findings and underscore unique dynamics in parental involvement evident at this school.

Parental involvement at Central Park: The good and the bad

At Central Park, parent members of the Key Communicator group appeared to have close friendship relationships with each other. Comments made by parents before the Key Communicator meetings indicated that they often helped each other in terms of babysitting, grocery shopping, and providing personal advice on parenting issues. In doing so, I thought that the Key Communicator group represented a social network for parents and some parents believed that this group was a particularly valuable resource when they required assistance with personal and school-related issues. However, as was the case at Valleyview, a clique of parents existed that linked themselves together so tightly that others felt they were prevented from gaining equal access to certain school functions.

Caring, collaborative ethos: A family metaphor

Whether discussing shared values such as the need to enforce a school-wide discipline policy collectively, working together to ensure that activities for children extend beyond the school day, or offering support by providing meals to a parent at Central Park whose newborn baby was ill, a caring and collaborative community appeared to characterize the Key Communicator meetings at Central Park, according to the participants. Their descriptions also revealed the prevalence of a family metaphor. When asked to explain her experiences as a Key Communicator representative at Central Park, Amanda claimed,

> We are one big family here at Central Park. My children have been at other schools and that feeling was never there. Roxanne comes to my house all the time to help me out if I am going to get groceries and need someone to look after the kids. Just the other day, Maria and her kids came over to my house for pizza.

Claiming that she had met these parents through the Key Communicator's group, Amanda evoked images of caretaking, affection, love, and warmth.

Similarly, Jean commented about a family-like experience when she assisted other parents of the Key Communicator group at a school fundraising event at Commonwealth Stadium:

> June [a parent on the Key Communicator group] reminds me so much of my mother when I was in elementary school. We are all at this fundraiser and June is just bouncing around but the funny thing about it is that we weren't doing anything fun. She is just a super happy person and the way she acts all the time makes me think about my mother.

Experiencing difficulties with her children at home, Maria solicited the help of Wanda and Susan to provide advice and suggestions about parenting skills:

> I swear that I have two of the most hyper kids in the world. Sometimes they act really bad to the point where it really frustrates me... So I called Wanda and Susan to help me out because I think their kids act much better than mine. Those women are like real sisters to me.

This suggested that Maria had developed a close relationship with Wanda and Susan as a result of their introduction at the Key Communicator meeting. It is interesting to note that the parents quoted above did not know each other prior to their attendance at the Key Communicator meeting. There, they became acquainted and developed relationships with each other via that medium.

Dissonance: The dark side of parental involvement at the school

Despite views of its importance by members and the key role it has played in uniting parents into meaningful friendships, interviews with the respondents at Central Park highlighted the complexities and conflicts which also emerged. When parents were asked whether certain individuals at the Key Communicator meetings have more power than others, a wide range of responses were given. Some believed that all members of the group shared responsibilities equally as there was no set chairperson for all the meetings throughout the year. Others noted that the principal did a good job in delegating responsibilities to many different parents instead of a specific group of individuals. Denoting differences between members, some described certain parents as "being more vocal than others" within the school or "possessing stronger personalities". However, others hastily informed me that a "clique" of parents existed at Central Park that banded together in an attempt to seize power and control over activities taking place at the school.

One such example was the EGGS Breakfast Club. Consisting of parent volunteers who came to the school from 8:00-8:30 am, Monday to Friday, the purpose of the EGGS Breakfast Club was to prepare breakfast for children attending Central Park Elementary School. Many comments from parents indicated a high level of satisfaction with EGGS as it provided a well-balanced nutritional start to their child's day. Not all parents, however, experienced similar feelings with the EGGS Breakfast Club. In fact, one parent who volunteered to assist in the smooth operation of the morning program experienced considerable anxiety. Becoming involved in the initiative, Roxanne claimed that she didn't feel welcomed in the mornings.

> They are very cold to me in the mornings. You feel so unwelcome. Wanda and Susan are very hard, not very social. Everything needs to be their way. I went in and worked with the one that cooks in the morning and she's a nice person, but it's all about image! The more I do, the better I look! I mentioned this to Wanda and Susan and the little clique ganged up on me like I was the one who was totally out of line. Ever since then there's been a lot of tension between us because I ended up running out of there totally upset. I just about quit the breakfast club and quit a lot of things at the school because of this. Nobody wants to be ganged up on.

This indicated that parental involvement at Central Park was not structured wholly at the discretion of the school. Tensions among parents also influenced their patterns of interaction, including patterns of inclusion and exclusion. To help mediate these tensions between parents, principal Mrs. Steingard decided to hold a meeting:

> They've got their little cliques. For example, a parent came forth that had just joined the EGGS morning club and made the comment that Susan and Wanda don't talk to us in the morning. So I said, "Why don't we have an EGGS Breakfast Club meeting to see how things are going?" I want to know how many kids are being served and I need to be responsible. At the

> meeting, one mom said, "Well if no one's going to say this, I'll say it, I find it very cold. People aren't very friendly. You know, you want us to volunteer but neither of you even say hello to us in the morning." So then they start to say "Well, I didn't mean to." So they were resolving it themselves which was nice.

With regards to the EGGS Breakfast Club, two parents led the group who were instrumental in determining which parents would be involved in the club and in what activities. Here, personal conflicts and differences obviously affected the course of parent volunteering within the breakfast club. Susan, one of the leaders of the morning club, related her perspective on Roxanne, the parent who felt unwelcome volunteering at EGGS in the morning.

> She's a yeller! Last year, there was a lot of yelling and it's just the way she parents. If she wants her kid's attention she yells. She has a very defensive personality so approaching her is hard because she automatically approaches it the wrong way instead of taking it as healthy criticism.

Despite the importance of the EGGS Breakfast Club, conflicts emerged between parents related to different perspectives of parenting styles, perceptions of commitment, and the extent of involvement that inhibited the construction of an open, trusting, and inviting infrastructure within which attitudes could be shared and actions implemented. Fortunately, principal Mrs. Steingard intervened in various situations and served as a catalyst helping to smooth disputes which occurred between parents. Expending considerable energy into building relationships, Mrs. Steingard was instrumental in promoting an atmosphere whereby parents felt welcome to participate in school activities.

Leadership at Central Park: The power of the principal

It is indeed fascinating to bring people with different personalities and expectations to the same table and discuss educational issues affecting their children. When I attended my first Key Communicator meeting at Central Park Elementary School, I wondered how it was possible that a group of fifteen parents and a principal could sit down and exemplify such trust, goodwill, and confidence with one another. As I began the process of interviewing parents at Central Park and participating in monthly meetings of the Key Communicator group, I soon began to realize that mutual trust and respect between members had apparently grown over time and appeared to have been strongly influenced by a dominant force: the principal.

Principal support for parental involvement at Central Park

Current notions of leadership suggest that principals need to be instructional leaders and innovators, able to use and apply research to improve learning, with a clear focus and vision. Principals also must be good managers, with conflict resolution and mediation skills. At Central Park Elementary School, Mrs. Steingard appeared to demonstrate these dimensions. With her main research area being inclusive learning in the classroom, she said she became interested in the methodology of narrative inquiry. She explained this form of analysis as focusing on individuals' life stories to create new forms of knowledge. Her educational studies had evidently influenced her pedagogy as a principal:

> I don't think the introduction of school councils changed anything about my relationships with parents. Maybe it's the way I interact with parents. I don't feel that I need a structure that says parents thou shall. I think that we really need to believe in parents and value their opinion. In my graduate work I

> looked at that issue and one of the arguments was the issue of parent personal practical knowledge. We have to honour the views parents have about their child and allow that to shape our views. We need to be on a level playing field with parents.

Collaborative working relations with parents and the staff had always been a goal for Mrs. Steingard. Serving as a principal at another school before coming to Central Park, she said that she was a firm believer that team learning, productive thinking, and collaborative problem solving should replace control mechanisms, top-down decision making, and enforcement of conformity:

> I was acting principal at Greenwood School for four months. When I first arrived there a lot of the parents were lining up to meet me and that was good because I am comfortable talking with parents. I really feel it is important to hear their voice. It doesn't bother me, I don't find it nerve-wracking to get out there, be up front with them, to put things out on the table.

In fact, the parents of Greenwood School appreciated Mrs. Steingard's interpersonal skills, vision, creativity, and passion for education so much that they didn't want her to leave after her four month term at the school. According to Mrs. Steingard,

> In four months I had turned an unhappy community into, they were weeping when I left. This group of parents never had an administrator who was up-front and honest with them and laid things out on the table for them. When I went to do my doctorate work, they called the trustee's office and wanted them to remove my leave of absence. I thought that was a very nice compliment.

At Central Park, parents made favourable comments about Mrs. Steingard. Kerri noted that the principal was cognisant and supportive of her family situation and this influenced her conceptualization of the principal:

> I remember the first time I walked into her office. I sat down with the principal and told her that my son has [a syndrome]. She nodded her head and said oh yeah, I know about that. That was a key turning point for me. Someone who actually knew what it was. Not only that, she helped me pay for a conference I went to see regarding my son's syndrome. I went to her and asked if she could help me pay for this conference and she said I'll write you a cheque right now. She gave me $200 I think.

Displaying a caring attitude and trusting that the parent would use the money to attend a conference, Mrs. Steingard empowered Kerri to become more knowledgeable of her son's disability. Similarly, June spoke about her respect for Mrs. Steingard:

> I love her! We've been working on a few issues over the last little while with me and my husband separating and the kids. I feel as I though I am really in touch with her. She's really approachable. We can sit down together and talk about what's going on. I feel comfortable with it.

Noting that the principal was the key individual responsible for creating an appropriate climate for parental involvement at Central Park, Amanda commented,

> She is absolutely committed to doing the right thing for the children. Dynamic and committed are two words that describe her. She is composed, articulate, and dynamic. Last year, I had an issue with one of the teachers here at Central Park. So the principal ordered myself and the teacher to have a meeting and helped fix the situation. I thought that was nice of her to do that.

This indicated that Mrs. Steingard was interested in helping to build relationships with the parents at Central Park and suggested that she engaged in a range of different ways to motivate them to become involved in their children's education.

Jean commented about the leadership style of the principal and referred to the school as being the principal's "house":

> She's professional, diplomatic, and committed. She really cares. She loves her job. I'm very comfortable with her. [In regards to the school rule prohibiting outdoor footwear to be worn in the school] She has no problem about giving you crap if you wear your dirty shoes in the school. She'll say that you are setting a bad example for the kids and please take your shoes off. She has no bones about that. Parents don't mess with her either. She's fair, compassionate, and professional but at the same time you know that this is her house and you don't come into her house with your shoes on.

The reference to the school being the principal's "house" connotes a sense of intimacy of hospitality: the parents are guests in a home. But at the same time the threshold of that home commands respect and deference to the rules of the house: you take your shoes off. It also evokes an image of parents as tenants under the guise of the landlady: Mrs. Steingard. The next section further explores the leadership style employed by Mrs. Steingard at the Key Communicator's meetings.

Governing the Key Communicator meetings

My observations at the Key Communicator meetings confirmed the views of parents that the principal gave them support, exhibited moral integrity, fostered collaboration, offered intellectual stimulation, and encouraged shared decision-making. For example, during the meetings, Mrs. Steingard often asked for parental input on various issues and, on several occasions, she thanked parents for their involvement in the school and verbally reinforced the notion that the school was a much better place because of the support they give to existing school programs. However, despite these smooth social interactions at the Key Communicator meetings, I did notice role expectations that placed parents in a subordinate position to the principal.

At the Key Communicator meetings, the principal assumed the role of resource provider, activity initiator, and served as a catalyst in the political arena when conflicts occurred. She spoke frequently about curriculum related matters, the instructional focus of the school, budget allocations for the upcoming school year, and teacher's professional development activities. The principal also shaped the Key Communicator environment in many ways: constructing the agenda for meetings, facilitating discussions, and pointing to the importance of certain school initiatives. When Mrs. Steingard first became the principal of Central Park, she noticed that agendas were not used at the Key Communicator meetings. However, she believed that agendas were an important component and introduced them. She claimed, however, that this was not a straightforward process:

> When I became the principal at Central Park, I arrived at the school and talked with the previous principal. I talked about how the parents were possibly ready to go on to the next level where they really needed to start being a parent division for our school as opposed to just attending the meetings downtown at the district education building. They need to know what's going on at the district level but they also need to know what's going on in the school… I shifted from going to a restaurant to having dinner at the school. I thought that the restaurant was too social. So at our first meeting, I brought an agenda. One of the parents said, "*Oh, she's got one of those.*" So, I slipped that back into my briefcase and I had to gauge what they were willing to do.

This principal remained committed to the goal of having formal agendas for the Key Communicator meetings and developed them herself. At the beginning of all the Key Communicator meetings I attended, Mrs. Steingard circulated an agenda that she had devised and a parent from the group chaired the meeting by reading aloud the topics listed on Mrs. Steingard's agenda. The role of chairperson was shared among the parents at the Key Communicator meetings with a different parent fulfilling the position at subsequent meetings. According to Mrs. Steingard, the next step for the Key Communicator group was for them to start devising their own agendas. She believed that this would signify a logical progression in terms of their development:

> When I first started at Central Park, this group [Key Communicators] were still trying to develop stability. None of them would chair a meeting. Now they are willing to rotate, share the position and try out the role of the chair. The next goal for them is that they'll be able to develop an agenda by themselves instead of me doing it for them.

From this, it was apparent that Mrs. Steingard provided impetus for what she considered to be growth of the Key Communicator group. Moving the parents through almost a pedagogical process, Mrs. Steingard attempted to nurture the group into her vision of what she wanted it to become.

Generally, I observed that parents assumed less active roles than the principal at the Key Communicator meetings: they tended to simply support the principal's suggestions. For example, input from parents centred on "housekeeping matters" such as the football parking problem, kissing issues between children on the school playground, or parental roles in Christmas events, Penny Auctions, or fundraising initiatives. However, Central Park parents appeared to be content with this arrangement and did not express any desire to become further involved in school decision-making.

We're not a school council: A strong desire to keep things simple

According to the School Council Resource Manual (1995), school councils are collective associations of parents, teachers, principals, staff, students, and community representatives who seek to work together to promote the well-being and effectiveness of the entire school community and thereby to enhance student learning. Providing samples on how to construct an agenda, how to record minutes, and how to elect officers for the school council meetings such as the Chair, co-Chair, Secretary, and Treasurer, the School Council Resource Manual (1995) specifies acceptable parameters and guidelines for school council formation.

In my interviews with parents who participated in the Key Communicator group at Central Park, I asked them how their group name came about. All respondents indicated that they were unsure as to how they got the name *Key Communicators* and were not interested in knowing its origins. As Suzanne commented,

> We are not an official school council. We never have been. I think we are called a Key Communicator group but it makes no difference to me. We always go downtown after our meetings to the district education office so maybe that's why.

Kerri viewed the group largely as providing school support rather than input on school decisions.

> It's almost an auxiliary committee. It's ways to help the school support things like the story sacks, the EGGS morning breakfast club. Things like that instead of being an advisory committee.

The name of the group appeared not to be a major concern to the parents. Instead, what happened during the meetings and how they were executed was of strong interest.

According to Mrs. Steingard, much opposition was raised at the beginning of the year by parents when she asked the group if they would like to become an official school council as mandated by government legislation. This would have entailed substantial changes to the group since school councils, as they existed in legislation, were expected to establish a mission statement, a vision statement, partake in strategic planning, construct agendas for each meeting, select a chair for the meetings, and have a secretary take minutes to obtain a clear objective summary of what went on at the meeting. (Alberta Education, 1995). Mrs. Steingard claimed that converting the group from the way it existed to an official school council would be of little value.

> This happens every year. I brought it forward. I got a booklet about the formation of a school council and we do what the government asks us to do, we advertise saying that we are going to hold a school council formation meeting, please come to the meeting. I put it out on the table and the group says "N*o, we want to continue as we are.*"

This notion became apparent in the interviews with parents as no one wanted to become a school council as it existed in legislation. Roxanne expressed her displeasure from being involved in a school council at another school before sending her children to Central Park.

> It was cold, very cold. That was my experience at the last school council. I found that there was never room for me to discuss other things and all that sort of stuff. It wasn't as cozy as it is here at Central Park. We are more informal here.

June also indicated that she was pleased with the non-hierarchical, collegial pattern of the Key Communicator group and did not want anything to change.

> The meetings run just fine the way they are and if it's not broke, don't fix it. I've been on Boards and stuff like that before you know where you have your Secretary, President, Chair, co-Chair, Treasurer and it's just like I didn't want to do that. It wasn't worth it. At our meetings we are still going to be covering the exact same stuff whether or not we have a president or not. It just doesn't matter and it's nice that we can just all sit down as a group, as friends and just function that way.

Similarly, Susan claimed that school councils were too formal, regulatory, and political, reinforcing a notion of power and control.

> We don't want to function like a school council you know where the minutes are taken by the treasurer or the secretary and all that. We voted no. Why waste all that time and energy writing down minutes and having one person in charge. That's the formalities. That bores people. Its not fun chairing a meeting where you follow rules and everything has to be perfectly right.

Viewing school councils as hostile terrain, Amanda stated,

> School councils don't appeal to me. Power trips happen when some people have more power than others and there are certain people like that. They have to get into everything and they have to control everything. I'm glad it's not part of our group at Central Park and if they had roles like President, Secretary, Treasurer, I wouldn't be there.

Mrs. Steingard concurred with the views of parents and believed that the school council structure did not recognize parental diversity and social class:

> The school council framework requires people to know how to chair a meeting. They need to take on roles and responsibilities be that President, be the Vice-President. People take minutes at school council meetings. Those things are uncomfortable for some parents. That's pretty bad when they're still trying to develop stability... I feel the school council is a middle class idea and this is not a middle class school.

Together, the comments by parents and the principal indicated that school councils, as defined by government legislation were problematic within the Central Park context. Participants shared a belief that concentrating power exclusively within a governing elite such as Chairs, co-Chairs, Treasurers, and Secretaries, confining discussions to a strict agenda, and assuming that all parents had the knowledge to fulfil various roles would contradict and fracture the informal, collaborative nature of parental participation in educational decision-making at Central Park.

"Kitchen Table" Key Communicator meetings

It was 4:30 pm on a Wednesday afternoon in November. I arrived at Central Park Elementary School for my first official visit, removed my footwear at the front entrance following the school's practice, and made my way to the staff room. Above all the eye-catching wall signs and the bustle of hallway cleaning equipment, my nose soon informed me that a meal was the first item of business at the Key Communicator meeting.

Within 5 minutes, parents arrived and greeted me with warm smiles as they too look forward to a relaxed, sit-down buffet. Favourable comments were made about the aroma of the meal. The anticipation on their faces spoke to the importance of the meal in encouraging a free flow of dialogue, finding out what everyone had done that day, or simply enjoying time together. Conversations around the table were about work, events going on at the school, new pets in the house, or the trials and tribulations associated with putting up Christmas lights at home.

According to the parents interviewed, the meal served before the Key Communicator meeting set the tone for a relaxing and social event for parents. Kerri commented,

> The meal is nice because a lot of people are just rushing there from picking up their kids and taking them home after school. I know personally that if the supper wasn't provided I wouldn't be eating until about 10 pm and everything was done. Its nice because you can rush there and then you can relax once you get there. I can just sit down and chit chat for a little while and then get into school business.

These parents appeared to genuinely appreciate both the food and the social opportunity.

> We've had soup and sandwiches and wraps and chicken and rice and fresh fruits and salads and desserts. But for me, the most important thing is it is a social time and gives me some time away from my kids and being with other parents. I find that when people have food in front of them they're more open to discuss things and just talk about things.

Some actually looked forward to this school event:

> Isn't the meal cool? I look forward to it. Its like sitting down for a buffet. It starts conversation and gets people comfortable. It's a break for a lot of moms. It's one night that I don't have to cook. It's a treat! It really is! It gives the social aspect like a bunch of people get together for a meal and they discuss things. It's just like getting together for coffee, a book club. It's not like tap tap tap ok let's start this meeting. (Maria)

> It's these gorgeous meals! Who wouldn't want to go out and enjoy them. What a nice evening to be around nice people and have intelligent conversations. I'm learning. I'm contributing to my child's education. Its nice. Its social. Its fun. Its once a month and it's a real hoot. (Wanda)

Mrs. Steingard saw the meal as an important place to build community among parents:

> It's about using *the kitchen table*… That is where you sit and talk. You enjoy each other's company and you can do business at the table but a meal brings those kinds of things out. We break down the barriers when we share a meal.

Funded primarily through donations given to the school by outside agencies, the meal served before the Key Communicator meeting at Central Park unquestionably added a distinct flavour to the group conducive to establishing healthy relationships between families and the school. My observations at the Key

Communicator meetings supported the comments made by the principal and parents about the "kitchen table" atmosphere of the meals as they provided a welcoming, respectful, positive, and supportive climate for all parents involved. The meals also added a family dimension to the Key Communicator meetings at Central Park giving members time to relax, to belong, and to be accountable to one another. These meetings also were an event for women, as no fathers chose to attend.

Gendered parental involvement at the meetings and at the school in general

At the Key Communicator meetings, father participation appeared to be almost non-existent. All the meetings I attended were comprised solely of mothers of students attending the school. Comments made by mothers regarding the lack of paternal involvement at the Key Communicator meetings illustrated an acceptance of a gendered role division, as though mothers were naturally more interested in their child's care and education. For example, June stated,

> I'm the one who does everything. I get up and get her breakfast in the morning. I make sure she is clean and that her clothes aren't dirty. I walk her to school in the morning. I try to help her out when I volunteer at the school. Sometimes the homework is hard that she brings home at night so I do my best to help her with that. My husband works a lot.

Denise loved volunteering in any classrooms, not just her own child's:

> I love being in the kids' classrooms. If I can help a small group do something like make a bulletin board or help them put on their jackets and mittens the happier I am. That's just the nature of us moms at Central Park. It doesn't matter to us that we aren't spending time at the school with our own kids.

Suzanne felt it was the mother's role to be involved in the child's school:

> Moms do that sort of thing. They are always the ones that are the most involved. You come by Central Park any day and you will see that moms are the only ones here. I think in general this is a stereotype and I don't like speaking in stereotypes but women are the one's who really care about what goes on with their children at school.

Similarly, Maria reinforced the notion of role expectations within her family,

> I think it's probably just because of the way that the roles are played out at home. My husband works all day and the last thing he wants to do is go to a meeting at the school. Most moms are at home with their kids most of the time and dad is at work so mom is going to be the one that's going to the school and mom is going to be the one that is most involved.

Other comments indicated that the Key Communicator meetings at Central Park were viewed as a "woman's night out", almost excluding men. While conducting my interviews at the participant's homes, some of the fathers were present and offered valuable insights when I asked why there were no men at these meetings. Mark, Denise's husband, spoke about an instance where a grandfather did attend one of the Key Communicator meetings.

> I heard a story about a grandfather that went to one of those meetings and they hen-picked him so bad. I was sorry for the guy (laughs). He couldn't have known what he was getting himself into. From what I hear, he hasn't been back there since. It's her night out and I don't want no part of it.

John, Amanda's husband, expressed similar concerns upon overhearing my conversation with his wife. He walked from the kitchen into the living room where the interview was talking place and said,

> What holds me back from the Key Communicator meetings is that there are too many women. Everyone knows that it is their thing. I think it's because most of them are stay at home moms and they're the ones that know what's going on in the school. I've been on a few field trips and one thing that I've noticed is that it's kind of cliquey and I find that they create an undesirable, uncomfortable environment for someone that wants to come in and do

> something. It doesn't encourage people to come in and do things because on a field trip, the women are off somewhere talking in their little group.

Kerri reaffirmed this view saying,

> My husband doesn't attend the meetings because he doesn't feel comfortable there with all of us women. I asked him one night if he would like to go and take my place and he said that he would never go there. I would love to see him get involved and I think it would be awesome to see more men there and see how they would deal with what's happening at the school as opposed to just mothers. It is just too intimidating for him. I think that we are an intimidating group. You have to remember that it's all women in there and to a man, that's intimidating.

These excerpts revealed that the roles that fathers and mothers assumed in the family were not identical. With mothers attending to the day-to-day events at the school and participating at the Key Communicator meetings, there was a strict gendered division of labour within the family in terms of involvement in their children's education. This division followed norms that many participants said they had grown up with. For example, Roxanne indicated that when she was in school, her mother was the predominant figure in her education.

> I always remember my mother helping me with my homework. She didn't know a whole lot, but she would always ask me if there was anything that she could help me with. I'll never forget her for doing that. My dad was the only one who worked and he had to work late every night.

Wanda linked the identity of "good mom" to supporting the child in school:

> My mother was the best. Even though I didn't get far in school, I always remember her walking with me to school and picking me up after school. And I also remember her singing me songs... It puts pressure on me because I want to be a good mom to my child and try to do for her the things my mother did for me.

Submerged in these accounts was also the vast amount of mothering work embedded in education, perhaps invisible but demanding considerable time, energy, and familiarity with the educational system. Fathers were not as active in their children's education and delegated this responsibility to their wives.

Central Park Elementary School: Discussion

From the information collected from the participants at Central Park, four findings in particular appear to best characterize parental participation in the school council. First, a 'family' metaphor evident in the language of parents and the principal denoted a sense of unity among members which characterized the nature of the Key Communicator meetings. The opposite was true when parents described their experiences with activities such as the EGGS Breakfast Club, where exclusive cliques and boundaries caused some discontent. Second, the power of the principal was evident in shaping and moulding the Key Communicator members in accordance with her views of what the group should become. Third, parental resistance to becoming a school council emphasized their dislike for formality. Fourth, the gendered role separation at meetings and the school in general revealed that mothers contributed significantly more time and energy than fathers in their children's educational development. Here, a "women's culture" appeared to dominate parent involvement activities.

A family metaphor: Patterns of parental interaction at Central Park

In a publication on education and community, Sergiovanni (1994) outlines a conception of community using Tonnies' distinctions between Gemeinschaft (community) and Gesellschaft (society). Believing that many schools are experiencing a loss of community, Sergiovanni stresses the importance of face-to-face communication and the need to shift our focus away from the idea of schools as organizations and replace this notion with an understanding of schools as learning communities tied together by moral commitment, trust, and a sense of purpose. Underscoring the nature of relationships within communities and societies, which range from more natural and organic to more mechanical or rational, he goes on to assert that in order for schools to function as communities, educators should not only place emphasis on the curriculum but also develop bonds with students and parents. Here, relationships within a community are rooted in familiarity and interdependence whereas societal relationships reflect formal, contractual relationships. At Central Park, the notion of a community pervaded the Key Communicator meetings. In fact, relationships between parents, language used at the Key Communicator meetings, and occasional tensions characterized the solidarity of the parents that appeared reminiscent of a nuclear family. Many respondents referred to themselves in terms of family life, such as "we are one big family at Central Park", "June reminds me so much of my mother", and "those women are real sisters to me". These comments indicated strong relationships that parents felt with one another and this helped them to make connections between various issues and problems experienced in everyday life.

This family notion was foregrounded in the ways many parents described their relationships with each other. Promoting a sense of universal responsibility for helping each other, the school also reinforced activities such as storysacks and home and school connection meetings which established a web of interdependence linking parents together. At Central Park, some parents indicated that they knew other parents very well and cared for each other in times of need and saw themselves not as self and other but as an interdependent whole. This finding reinforces Smrekar's (1996) notion of 'common ground' whereby parents in her study bonded as a result of shared values and similar educational backgrounds. The contours of similarity across class, occupation, and neighbourhood provided the links to bind the families that participated in the Key Communicator meetings.

Despite the 'closeness' of some relationships as expressed by parents, tensions also arose. In the EGGS Breakfast Club, for instance, some parents wielded considerable power to form a little clique. This created a social boundary and tension among parents, discouraging others from participating. Interestingly, these tensions were not reported at the Key Communicator meetings. Here, members of the clique seemed to merge into the larger parent body, and were even apologetic regarding their actions when EGGS was discussed in the larger group with the principal. However, apparently little changed in the long term and the clique resorted back to their unwelcoming, intolerant behaviour when the school principal was not present, according to parents who felt excluded.

This research emphasizes the role of social networks in helping foster parental participation in education. Repeated calls for greater community and democratic participation within schools accent educational research (Apple, 2005; Leithwood, Jantzi, and Steinbach, 1999; Mintrom, 2001; Miretzky, 2004). Together, these studies emphasize the importance of fostering collaboration and cooperation between families and schools by encouraging honest communication, trust, and a mutual respect from one another. At Central Park, the social networks which existed between parents mediated the influence of their relatively low social positioning. For example, babysitting advice, behavioural concerns of their children, reputations of particular teachers at the school, and information about various programs provided an invaluable tool for Central Park parents to maximize their children's academic success. Promoting such relationships in this wider context exemplified the power of the school principal to influence the relational fabric at Central Park.

The principal: Power to reproduce and transform simultaneously

According to Thomson (2001), the actions of principals are always contextual since interests vary in accordance to different issues, location, time, student enrolment, and composition of staff and parents. Claiming that principals must 'identify' with the context of the school, Thomson notes that the work of a principal is embodied in complex and shifting situations. Similarly, Wenger (1998) asserts that principals may be well served by exploring the social, professional, and site-based 'communities of practice' to which they belong. This will help uncover the sometimes messy, unpredictable, and consuming nature within which they are embedded. At Central Park, the principal adapted her leadership style to fit the context of the school which, in the end, maintained parents in a deficient position. For example, while providing parents with frequent opportunities for feedback, she also exercised her administrative authority by fabricating the agenda for Key Communicator meetings and articulating the goals of the group. This does not suggest that Mrs. Steingard is responsible for imposing a middle class structure on the educational governance group. However, it illustrates the way that she has been constructed by the system and the pressure she feels to reflect the expectations of the school district. For example, Mrs. Steingard believes that it is important to empower parents to take on roles that she has been constructed to believe are important.

The parents interviewed at Central Park all commented about the long hours which Mrs. Steingard spent in fulfilling a range of roles, responsibilities, and commitments to her work along with the inevitable tensions and stress that she must have experienced as a principal. They also used terms such as knowledgeable, experienced, thoughtful, committed, energetic, and fair to describe her as an educational leader. Her support for involving parents in the educational process, however, translated into open and responsive attitudes toward opportunities for school-family collaboration and actions that reflected these attitudes. This indicated that Mrs. Steingard was successful at internalizing the social structures of the school and at developing an educational field between the policy producing apparatus of school council legislation and the actual everyday practices at Central Park. According to Ball (1994), this interaction of the context of policy production (the state) with the context of practice (the school) is affected by various contexts of influence. For example, while policies that promote parental participation in the UK aimed at giving parents an increased role in the schools their children were attending, the author asserts that in practice, this change is superficial as parental governors are often recruited by the school administration as opposed to being elected.

While the principal sits at the formal interface between the state and the school community, Mrs. Steingard's emphasis on creating a welcoming, friendly environment appeared to resonate with many parents. Comments from parents revealed that that they enjoyed receiving thank you letters and notes from the principal, some also indicated that they liked being acknowledged in the school newsletter, while others reported that they received gifts of appreciation at school assemblies for their involvement at the school. By expressing gratitude to the parents, the principal emphasized the importance of the contributions these parents were making to their children's education by being involved at Central Park.

Notwithstanding her role in helping improve family-school partnerships at Central Park, Mrs. Steingard also tried to mould the Key Communicator group according to her vision of how the group should be run. This included formal agendas to structure the gathering, pre-determined topics to focus the dialogue, formal meeting protocols and formal roles for parents' participation. While the principal initially developed these elements, her goal was to devolve this responsibility to parents. Mrs. Steingard was actually successful in having a different parent chair the Key Communicator every month. Her approach to shaping and facilitating formal organisational structures for parent participation Key Communicator group has been supported by considerable research as vital for the success of councils (Campbell, 1992; David, 1994; Reid, 1998; Watkins, 1990).

However, these structures also worked to solidify the power of the principal. At the Key Communicator meetings, I noticed that Mrs. Steingard spent considerable time dominating the conversations as many parents appeared to lack the necessary information to make decisions. The agenda she developed determined which issues were dominant and which were obscured or marginalized. Further, she decided the activities that would take place at the meetings and how those activities would be conducted. This is significant because parents unanimously indicated that they disliked the formalities attached with becoming an official school council such as taking minutes at the meetings and having designated roles such as Chair, co-Chair, Secretary, and Treasurer. Mrs. Steingard's belief that parental interactions required bureaucratic order reflected her own cultural experience and values. Some literature supports the same values. But from a critical perspective, this dynamic represents patterns of educational reproduction. This is similar to Bourdieu's (1998) conceptualization of 'field': a structured space which consists of people who dominate and people who are dominated. Theorizing society as consisting of a number of fields, Bourdieu suggests that relations between members in a field may work in a hierarchical fashion with those who possess the most power sitting in a dominant position. As fields have their own structures, interests, and preferences, the Key Communicator group at Central Park illustrated not only the power of the principal to shape the parents' practices over their initial resistance, but also how the principal's notions of best practice are shaped through particular fields. School councils, like other sites of decision-making and authority in schooling, are dominated by institutional fields valuing order, hierarchy, formal communication, and standardized procedures.

School councils don’t appeal to us

Considerable literature has responded to the need to recognize the lack of differentiation of parents within parental involvement research (Connell et al., 1982; Hanafin and Lynch, 2002; Lareau, 2000; Lightfoot, 1978; Neychyba et al., 1999; Vincent, 1996). Together, these studies have reaffirmed the significance of social factors on parents’ capacities to become involved in their children’s education by raising concerns related to the differences in resources parents of varying social status can provide their children. In particular, low-income parents are often positioned as being unable to construct effective challenges to schools as they lacked the appropriate cultural capital and material resources to establish a voice in their relationship with their children’s school. According to Vincent (2001), working class parents have a different way to talk about their involvement in schools compared to upper-middle class groups. Vincent characterizes an upper-middle class assertiveness and a working-class silence when addressing their access to and deployment of social resources. While this passivity was evident at the educational governance meetings at Central Park, parents were quite vocal in expressing the view that they did not want to form a school council as defined by government legislation.

Within the school district, school councils have emerged as a mechanism for parental involvement in decision-making. With government legislation requiring each school to have a school council, they offered an alternative to a highly centralized, hierarchical administrative framework and intended to give parents an opportunity to provide input into educational decisions made at the school.

Specifying governance models that regulated how the school council would operate and election procedures to follow for membership on the council, the Alberta Government did not create an opening for creativity allowing parents to develop a school council that functioned according to their desires.

At Central Park, parents unanimously chose not to become a school council as defined by government legislation. They indicated a fear that procedures of agendas, mission statements, minute-taking and the like would increase power struggles among members and limit cooperation. According to Bourdieu (1990), parental dislike for formal organizational structures may be related to their habitus or the way that they internalize social structures and perceive the world. Informal gatherings which lacked the rigidity imposed by specific roles and responsibilities were more compatible with their preferred patterns of social interaction. Fortunately, the school recognized the disjuncture between the habitus of the parents and the habitus implicit in school council policy, and attempted to create a culturally responsive alternative to address the situation.

Having a meal before the meeting served to help bridge this divide by promoting, according to the parents themselves, a relaxed atmosphere and collaboration among them. While a meal was not recognized by the Alberta Department of Education as a prerequisite for success, at Central Park it was an important place for parents to share their parenting experiences, issues and skills with each other, and for the school to recognize and thank parents for their involvement. This junction between the home and school was important because at Central Park, parental recruitment procedures were targeted specifically at the population being served by the school. The welcoming environment and the ample opportunities for parents' active involvement in Central Park appeared to build both their confidence in the school and their willingness to participate.

Several research studies emphasize the core elements of commitment, shared beliefs, interdependence, and communication when dealing with parental involvement (Epstein, 2001; Lareau, 2000; Lightfoot, 1978; Vincent, 2000). This section demonstrates that the context of family life must be taken into account when developing partnerships with parents. By themselves, generic forms of participation strategies such as school councils ignore context. Missing a consideration of social positioning, family structure, and neighbourhood, policies that inform parental involvement in educational governance will reinforce inequality. As a school, Central Park demonstrated the value of enlisting parental support.

"Mother-culture" at Central Park

Considerable research on parental involvement tends to be from an educational or school vantage point, and leaves aside family perspectives (e.g., Barbour and Barbour, 1997; Collins, Cooper and Whitmore, 1995; Dixon, 1992; Foster, 1984; Newport, 2000; Wolfendale, 1989). Much of this literature also ignores gender, although some literature considers issues from the point of view of families arguing that gender must be recognized in discussing parental involvement in education (David, 1993; Griffith and Smith, 2005; Reay, 1998; Standing, 1999; Vincent, 2001). Being more critical of schooling and implying a differentiated parent voice, these studies argue that it is invariably mothers that are primarily involved in their children's education. Substantiating the literature, at Central Park, mothers exclusively participated in the daily activities of the school: volunteering at the school, helping their children with homework, or participating on the Key Communicator group. Both fathers and mothers appeared to feel this was the mother's role, and some fathers indicated that they felt outside the mother-culture at the school. This reproduced a traditional gendered division of labour with mothers assuming nurturing child-related obligations.

A further commonality among participants was that their own mothers were primarily the ones involved in their education when they were in school. For example, comments suggested that parental involvement was an issue of continuity with the past whereby their mothers helped them with homework, attended school events, and fulfilled basic obligations such as ensuring that their children arrived at school or providing advice to their children when problems arose.

The role of fathers at Central Park among those participants interviewed appeared to be primary breadwinners for the family. Mothers, on the other hand, were responsible for childcare and involvement in schooling. Interestingly, fathers who spoke during the interviews claimed that they did not wish to attend Key Communicator meetings because this was largely the mother's domain. For example, past occurrences of a grandfather attending a Key Communicator attending a meeting and being "hen-picked" by the women in attendance and another instance where a father participated on a fieldtrip and felt unwelcome due to the clique-like nature of the women served to discourage fathers from getting involved. This finding is reinforced by research which addresses the salience of fathers to children's lives, especially among parents of low socio-economic status

(Zill and Nord, 1994; Vaden-Kiernan and Davis, 1993; Stevenson and Baker, 1987). A common theme within these studies suggests that less educated fathers (and parents in general) feel more intimidated by the school setting or have had bad experiences with school that make them reluctant to become involved.

Given the support by the school to increase parental involvement, it is interesting to note that nothing was done specifically to encourage fathers' involvement. This is important because fathers indicated that involvement in their children's education was important, albeit the mothers' responsibility. Some were concerned about being the only men in attendance at the Key Communicator meetings and one father indicated that he did not feel welcome on the field trips as these were primarily women-dominated events.

While there were multiple ways for parents to become involved in their children's education at Central Park, a key finding from this research indicated that it was invariably mothers who were involved in the educational process. While the accounts from women suggested that they cared passionately about their children's education, the non-existent participation of fathers offers an opportunity for Central Park to better direct their parental involvement efforts. This reinforces Griffith and Smith's (2005) conceptualization of the mothering discourse which situates women as being primarily responsible for coordinating the family's relation to school.

Central Park Elementary School Conclusion

The parents interviewed at Central Park placed a high value on education and expressed the belief that education was important. Strong feelings about the importance of their children graduating from high school were apparent and a tentative interest in having them attend college was a typical comment rendered about future educational aspirations for their children. To help accomplish this goal, it appeared that parents united as a family supporting each other and shared parenting approaches that assisted child-rearing practices. As well, parents joined in the activities of the school and felt a sense of accomplishment through frequent award ceremonies held at the school and recognition provided by the principal in the monthly school newsletters.

Despite the high transitory population of Central Park, I felt an interconnectedness between the home and the school. The powerful influence of the principal in reproducing a hierarchical role structure at Central Park by mandating certain elements of the Key Communicator group that she deemed to be relevant was not contested by parents. At the Key Communicator meetings, parents were also given considerable freedom to provide input and respond to the authoritative relations at the school.

CHAPTER 7

REFLECTIONS, DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This chapter provides a critical reading of the cases, as well as an interpretive analysis of the participants' stories. I have arranged the information into three sections which include: reflections on the study, a discussion of the findings, and recommendations for future research initiatives on school councils within the Alberta context.

Reflections on the Study

The main purpose of this study was to explore the nature of parent and principal participation and relations in two school councils. I was also interested in exploring the various roles of parents and principals on school councils and determining the relative power of these stakeholders in decision-making.

This study used an interpretive approach, understanding participants' stories as authentic representations of their lived experiences. But in addition, a critical reading was brought to these cases to highlight the gendered nature of parental involvement in educational governance and the impact of families' social positioning. In particular, issues around the distribution of power and knowledge, possible structural inequities, and the construction of particular roles for parents were explored to determine the extent to which the enacted school council achieved its goals of creating a democratic space for dialogue and participatory decision-making. Two sites were compared to examine parent experiences participating in educational governance. Central Park is located in the city's downtown core, mainly attracted students from the surrounding inner city neighbourhood. Many of the 196 students lived with low income families, and 65% were visible minorities. At Central Park parents often participated in various school activities designed to enhance parent-school connections, children's literacy, and feeding hungry children. The school did not have a school council as mandated by government legislation because parents wanted more informal meetings. Parent participation was predominantly women.

By contrast, Valleyview was situated in a wealthy suburb. Many parents in the school were university-educated and held professional-managerial positions. Of the school's 168 students, 97% were White. The school council at Valleyview was formally structured, highly vocal, and addressed a broad range of issues ranging from school budget to school activities, with particular parental focus on funding issues. Parent participation on the school council was dominated by men's voices and concerns, though women tended to dominate the everyday parental involvement in school activities.

Discussion

Clearly, Central Park and Valleyview Elementary Schools presented very different institutions in location, student demographics, and parent involvement in governance practices. In the following sections I compare them to highlight the exclusionary nature of school council policy, social positionality and differences in parental participation, the power of the principals in framing the politics of parental involvement, contrasting approaches and dynamics to parental involvement, the gendered nature of parental involvement, and school councils and democratic participation.

The exclusionary nature of school council policy

The policy shift to incorporate school councils into the educational fabric of schools in Alberta may have appeared as commonsense, rational and legitimate, but this research revealed a structural inequality that permeated their existence. By their very nature, school councils projected a model that appealed specifically to higher income parents rather than serving as an open invitation for all parents to become involved in educational decision-making.

School council policy, as it existed in legislation, promoted the exact components and roles that Central Park parents indicated they disapproved of and were uninterested in fulfilling. Thus, in attempting to reach out and include families in the educational decision-making process, this research indicated that the school council model reflected the notion of how school policy was aligned to higher income families and deflated the aspirations of lower income parents to become involved, while proclaiming to promote a pathway to increase parental involvement in the education of their children.

When this research was undertaken, school councils were mandated forms of parental participation since the Province of Alberta required all schools to establish them. By using their power to mandate this form of parental participation at all schools, the Alberta Government imposed Bourdieu and Passeron's (1977) notion of symbolic violence upon families. By symbolic violence, Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) refer to the exercise of power which imposes meaning on individuals and characterizes this as legitimate by hiding the power relations which formulate the action. At Valleyview, the advent of school councils was welcomed by parents because they possessed the cultural capital to succeed in such a venture. According to Bourdieu and Passeron (1977), cultural capital refers to a kind of knowledge that translated into power within certain institutional settings. Valleyview parents possessed a knowledge of the school system and their educational beliefs were symmetrical with those advanced by the school. Central Park parents, on the other hand, did not feel comfortable fulfilling the various roles mandated by school council legislation and developed an alternate medium with the assistance of the principal.

Known as the 'Key Communicator' group, parents at Central Park indicated that they felt confident going to these meetings and were reassured by the way the principal greeted them. These meetings held monthly at the school had the welcoming air of a community centre that provided a forum in which parents respected each other. In this sense, Central Park Elementary School overcame the symbolic violence mandated by government legislation and developed an alternative to school councils and questioned this universal framework for parental involvement. The government has never questioned Central Park for replacing the school council model with the Key Communicator group. However, Mrs. Steingard claimed that she would advise government officials that this was the framework parents wanted if the matter ever arose.

Similarly, McLaren (2002), in documenting the reasons why disadvantaged groups generally don't succeed in school believes that education has been stripped of its ethical nature. He asserted that teaching has become a deskilled profession whereby teachers have been reduced to perform the duties of clerks in the face of a mandated curricula. Criticizing the desirability of a curriculum which was culturally elitist, he emphasized that the education system functioned to maintain and legitimate a class divided society. In his view, schools were middle-class institutions operated by middle-class individuals and served middle-class pupils the best.

School councils, as they existed in legislation, closely resembled this conceptualization of schools as organizations that confirmed the advantages of the middle-class because they privileged and validated particular types of 'cultural capital' such as the knowledge needed to plan an agenda for the meetings, communicating information to the broader parent community served by the school, shared leadership responsibilities between the elected parents on the school council, and accessed various speakers, divisional resources, and shared reading materials for discussion. These roles and responsibilities for school councils were not 'natural' or 'familiar' to Central Park parents as many did not possess the knowledge or resources to complete such required tasks. For parents such as those at Central Park, this included knowledge of the educational system, the type of knowledge that came naturally to the parents at Valleyview because of their habitus, or ways of behaving. As a result, it was understandable that the lower income parents of Central Park chose to opt out and resisted involvement in the school council structure.

School council policy generally and continually affirmed a commitment to improving parental involvement in educational decision-making. For example, according to the Alberta School Council Effectiveness Review (2004) which elicited the opinions of seventy-one school council members, sixteen principals, and twelve school trustees across Alberta, school councils were successful at providing a forum for parents, teachers, principals, students, and community members to assemble for "genuine dialogue and collaboration regarding enhancing the education system – most predominantly at the local school level" (p.7). Despite widespread support of school councils as mechanisms to provide meaningful input in the educational decision-making process, the school council formula as it existed in Alberta at the time of this study espoused a romanticized view of parental involvement in education. Neglecting family material and cultural conditions, this research suggested that school council policy in Alberta may serve to exclude some families and promote a separation between these parents and schools. It must also be noted that there were a lot of families who did not participate in educational governance in both communities but the reasons for their absence extended beyond the scope of this research. According to my findings, school council policy impacted low-income families to a much greater extent than those who possessed higher income levels.

Social positionality and differences in parental participation: Higher income family 'assertiveness' and lower income family 'acceptance'

At both research sites, the social positioning of parents appeared to influence their degree of involvement in educational governance. The actions of parents in the educational governance meetings seemed to be directly linked to the resources that their education, occupational status, income, and differences in family life provided. For example, Valleyview parents felt comfortable discussing budgetary difficulties being experienced within the school district and openly critiqued a government official and school trustee that attended a school council meeting. When some parents found out that the Halloween celebrations were going to be altered, they emitted a high sense of personal efficacy and organized a protest outside the school. Challenging the principal on her allocation of students to various split classes, denying her funding to attend a professional development activity and questioning her skill at budgeting were just some examples of how Valleyview parents demanded accountability from the educational institution. Central Park parents, by contrast, were rarely critical of how the school was organized: they did not challenge the principal and appeared to follow her advice.

This contrast of Valleyview 'assertiveness' to Central Park 'acceptance' is arguably related to education or income levels, which were generally higher among Valleyview parents, and to their resulting higher social capital. Support for this perspective was offered by Connell et al. (1982) who state that the relationship between working-class parents and schools in their study were completely opposite than those of ruling-class parents since many working-class parents felt intimidated by the school and by the academic and social qualifications of the teachers. Ruling-class parents regarded teachers as their employees and as social equals. At Valleyview, the parents seemed more confident in their entitlement to speak, and in their identities as authoritative knowers and legitimate participants. Because of their knowledge and social positioning, Valleyview parents felt comfortable addressing various government officials and educational personnel at the school council meetings. Within this arena, discussions often focussed on broader educational issues such as inadequate educational funding and politics in addition to pertinent information at the school level. However, Key Communicator meetings at Central Park were primarily focussed on local school concerns. There, parents appeared to be passive participants with regards to both local school activities and those which extended beyond the perimeter of the school. Not once did parents pass judgement about their local MLA, school trustee, or raise concerns about educational funding at the meetings I attended. This finding is similar to Ball et al.'s (2002) notion of "horizons for action". Exploring young peoples' experiences with regards to educational and employment progression and the ways in which they construct their own learning, the authors argue that a person is always positioned somewhere, and such positions influence career progression and learning. Positions contribute to our horizons of action which may be both external and internal to the person. This means that they are influenced by opportunities which a person has access to (external) and also a person's perception of self and what they want to be (internal). For example, external influences might include available schools or colleges, the various courses offered at the institutions, or local job opportunities. Internal dimensions of horizons for action, according to Ball et al. (2002) refer to landscapes derived from the various dispositions a person holds. In their study, one young man, because of his particular private school position, combined with his middle-class social and cultural capital, considered only Oxford or Cambridge as potential universities he might attend. No other institution would suffice even though many had courses of the type he wanted. The authors assert that such opportunities are often structured through class, gender, and ethnicity. They are also influenced by the position and capital of the individual. At Valleyview, the horizons for action of the parents were wide as they possessed the resources to create a greater range of possible opportunities for involvement in educational governance. On the other hand, Central Park parents' horizons for action were particularly narrow given their habitus and consequently, the notion of school councils may not have appealed to them as it did not fit within their existing schematic view of themselves or their perceptions of appropriate involvement in their children's education.

Depicting the complex and intricate ways in which a student's education is closely related to the family's situation and experiences Connell et al. (1982) classify the organic relationship occurring between ruling class families and their market-oriented schools and the inorganic relationship between working class families and their state bureaucratic schools. Here, the authors contend that schools can make a difference and play a crucial role in reproducing class relations and social structures. However, it was interesting to note that the social class backgrounds of the parents assumed a predominant role in shaping parental involvement practices. For example, the authors introduce us to the working class Jones family whose son Kevin attended a school with a largely working class catchment. Because of their own educational experiences, both parents claim to feel like outsiders in relation to school and want 'the best' for their son (p.41). The authors describe that the Jones family is engaging in 'cooperative coping' as they are not actively participating in Kevin's education because of their own life experiences and view of the world that they have constructed.

In a later chapter, Connell et al. (1982) contrast the Jones' with a ruling class family labelled the Paton family whose daughter Marnie attends a prestigious school where the principal claims that "she finds herself talking as one executive to another" when interacting with parents. This indicates that some schools may favour students which come from middle class backgrounds and parent educational expectations for their children may vary based on their social positioning. As was the case at Central Park, many parents displayed Connell et al.'s (1982) conceptualization of 'cooperative coping' by assuming a relatively laissez faire attitude in terms of their children's educational programming and wanting their children to perform to the best of their ability. On the other hand, Valleyview parents promoted 'competitive striving' by critically challenging educational personnel on a host of issues confronting their children's education.

Based on my observations, radically different approaches to education were held by higher income parents as they were more proactive in dialoguing with the principal, not just over issues dealing with their own children, but also issues that affected the entire student body. The differences between parents at both schools were rooted in parental educational experiences, occupational pathways, lifestyles, the resources that parents had at their disposal, and the values they placed on education for their children.

In terms of values, both Central Park and Valleyview parents expressed the belief that education was important. However, a few Central Park parents couldn't engage in their children's education because of their material conditions as some indicated that their children had missed considerable amounts of school and claimed that they did not have the time to work with their children at home. Valleyview parents held higher educational aspirations for their children. Many indicated that they wanted their children to attain university degrees similar to their own educational backgrounds. They were also eager to assist their children with homework and strongly encouraged their children to read at home and conduct research on the computer. Many Valleyview parents insisted that they modelled this behaviour to their children on a regular basis and their comments suggested a ‘connectedness’ between the work done at home and at school.

This finding is consistent with considerable research which suggests that higher social positionality provides parents with more resources derived from their education, income, occupational status, and social networks to intervene in their children’s school than is available to lower-income families (de Carvalho, 2001; Lareau, 2000; Reay, 1998; Smrekar, 1996; Vincent, 2000). These studies indicate that the socio-economic background of families provides parents with particular sets of resources that either facilitate or limit their ability to shape their children’s educational experiences.

For example, Reay (1998), in her study of the social classed nature of women’s involvement with their children’s education, found that both working and middle class mothers invest considerable labour in their children’s education. However, middle class mothers are in a better position to draw upon resources to ensure that the educational system works for their children. In contrast, working class mothers usually lack the material resources to provide children with extra support in terms of homework requirements, transportation, and educational trips.

Believing that schools draw unevenly on the social and cultural resources in society, Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) assert that schools use particular language structures, authority patterns, and types of curricula that children of higher socio-economic standing already find familiar. Because of this "cultural capital", these children can make an easier transition to school and academic achievement than those from low socio-economic backgrounds who may lack this cultural capital. This perspective emphasizes the importance of the structure of the school and of family life in examining the process of education. As Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) believe, schools are ineffective at freeing achievement from the impact of the home and instead, legitimate a certain middle-class cultural capital.

With its friendly and welcoming atmosphere for parents, I felt that Central Park was not entirely representative of Bourdieu and Passeron's (1977) conceptualisation of the foreign language structures and authority patterns presented by an education system that reproduces social inequalities. From my observations, Central Park attempted to provide equal opportunities for all parents. The school built upon the habitus of the parents at Central Park legitimating the cultural capital of the families of students attending the school. For example, the school did not strictly follow government legislation and require parents to become members of a school council. As parents voiced strong opposition to this form of educational governance, the school accommodated their concerns and helped parents form an alternate informal Key Communicators space.

However, the imposition by the principal of formal agendas at the Key Communicator meetings and her attempt to have parents rotate in the position of

Chair at the meetings might be seen to reflect Bourdieu and Passeron's (1977) notion of symbolic violence: the exercise of power which manages to impose meanings by concealing the power relations inherent within them. Within the realm of symbolic violence, Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) refer to the term "pedagogic authority" which implies a delegation of action that was perceived to be both natural and necessary. At Central Park the principal imposed agendas onto parents as a formal organizing device, which she intended to use as a lever to gradually teach them to both accept and fulfil bureaucratic governance structures such as school councils. She expected the parents to recognize the legitimate authority of such an action, despite their emphatic preference for unstructured conversation at their meetings. She did not appear to recognize that her efforts to order proceedings much differently were anything but natural and necessary and also wanted to teach particular kinds of parenting practices.

Although inconspicuous, these meeting agendas were powerful tools, reflecting the ability of the principal to influence the parents by directing their attention to particular issues. As a result, it could be argued that the agenda served as a mechanism to exaggerate educational inequalities and promote particular kinds of knowledge and values which tend to be associated with professional classes. The agenda influenced what parents found out about certain issues, what choices were available to them, and shaped their input into educational decisions. The agenda may have restricted important information by not making it available to the group, governed the direction of the meeting, confined the issues, and directed certain members to have more voice than others. For example, at Central Park, certain parents' names were placed next to items on the agenda which prescribed them with specific roles. In my opinion, this further restricted the boundaries for debate.

For example, at the meetings I attended, "School Items" constituted a significant component of the Key Communicator meetings and this discussion was always led by the principal. Containing items such as the instructional focus work occurring at the school, fundraising activities taking place at the school, student led conferences, or updates on the Learning Commission Report, the principal set the tone and expectations for these discussion items by initiating conversation and expressing her personal viewpoint on the matters. She used her power to promote a certain viewpoint – such as the need for parents to not overreact when an unauthorized person was spotted in the school. Although this discussion item was framed in a subtle and unobtrusive way in the Key Communicator agenda, it provided the principal with an opportunity to frame the discussion in accordance with her desires. Parents never challenged her authority at any of the Key Communicator meetings I attended at Central Park. For this reason, the principal may have disregarded the habitus of the Key Communicator parent body at Central Park as parents shunned the idea of having an agenda at their first meeting with Mrs. Steingard. Feeling the negative reaction from parents, Mrs. Steingard placed the agenda back in her purse. However, at subsequent meetings, she remained steadfast in her quest to have parents follow an agenda and considered it to be a necessity for guiding discussion imposing her views on parents. This serves as one example where Mrs. Steingard may have subtly attempted to educate parents in keeping with professional practice by legitimating her own values and beliefs as desirable.

Drawing upon the work of Bourdieu and Passeron (1977), the path to educational equity depends on educational policies and practices assuming the notion that schools often adopt the views of the dominant culture. Consequently, educational policies and practices should strive to neutralize the advantage that some families, because of their social positioning, have over others. For example, at Valleyview, some parents indicated that they employed private tutors to help their children with homework and others divulged spending considerable monetary resources investing in technological aids for their children such as computers and educational software. Such educational advantages were not possible for Central Park students as their parents could not afford these luxuries. Along this line, a first step may be recognizing differences in capitals between parents and ensuring that inner-city schools are compensated for differences.

As evidenced in chapters 5 and 6, social positionality created a sizeable discrepancy between both schools. At Valleyview, the parents were not only quite comfortable participating in the formal structures, roles, language and discussion procedures of the school council meetings, but they appeared able to draw upon many strategies to influence these proceedings for their own interests. This comfort and familiarity, according to Bourdieu's notions of social and cultural capital, was gained at last partly through their educational and occupational success, and their resulting access to powerful social networks and resources. This cultural capital enabled their confidence and facility in negotiating and influencing the authority and language structures of schooling. Most Central Park parents did not demonstrate similar confidence or facility.

Power of the principals: Framing the politics of parental involvement

Considerable research has acknowledged the imbalance of power which structured relationships between parents, notably low-income parents and educational professionals (Bastiani, 1987; David, 1993; Lareau, 2000; Vincent, 1996). These authors believe that educational inequality in terms of parental involvement in education often originates from the difference between the professional knowledge of people such as principals and the lay knowledge of parents, such as members of the working class, ethnic minorities, or those that do not have access to educational resources. The findings in this study revealed that the principals at both schools had different challenges when it came to parental involvement. For example, the principal at Central Park used a dominant approach to the Key Communicator group. Possessing considerable knowledge of the educational system, Mrs. Steingard often spoke at length about student achievement, budgetary constraints, and school focus work. She held a substantial amount of power over the group and no one ever questioned her decisions. At Valleyview, Mrs. Magee practiced a more cautious approach to power and leadership. Because of the high socio-economic status of parents, Mrs. Magee was open to receiving input from parents on a host of educational issues. However, she was also mindful of maintaining personal power as the parents at Valleyview were highly vocalized and possessed enormous amounts of power themselves. Between both schools, a dichotomy was present whereby parents at Central Park were in a subordinate relationship with the principal whereas those at Valleyview considered themselves to be equal, if not superior, to the principal. Dixon (1992) suggests that two forms of partnership such as this can be characterized as "limited" and "full". Where parents are in a subordinate position to the principal, the author believes that their roles are constrained by what the principal considers appropriate.

At both Central Park and Valleyview, parents did not enter the schools as social equals with the principal. For example, conversations held at the Key Communicator meetings at Central Park indicated that the principal assumed the dominant role. Explaining to the parents various programs that she would like to see implemented at the school and promoting her vision of what the Key Communicator meetings should evolve into, the principal at Central Park often spoke "to" the parents instead of "with" them. On the other hand, comments made by the Valleyview principal indicated that some parents disrupted the operation of the school and considered themselves to be superiors in terms of student allocation to various classes and budgeting. For example, through initiating a Halloween Riot at the school, advising the principal about what split-classes their children should be placed in, and suggesting that the principal utilize their financial expertise, it was obvious that issues of power, authority, and control arose at this location as well.

Employing a critical perspective, it was possible to discern how parents could be embedded in and muted by power relationships in educational decision-making. At Valleyview and Central Park, both groups of parents under investigation participated within relations of power, that is, within both unequal, dominate-subordinate relations. For example, at Central Park, lower income parents tended to be involved in the school mostly in the traditional roles of fundraisers and field trip chaperones. Although parents attended Key Communicator meetings at the school, the principal was primarily responsible for setting the agenda items to be discussed at the meetings and most of the conversations at the meetings were led and controlled by the principal.

At Central Park, the agenda was considered by the principal to be a crucial text that delineated the format for the Key Communicator meetings. Containing messages about what the principal considered to be important, the acceptable parameters of choice, and what the principal considered to be legitimate topics for discussion amongst parents, the agenda was a powerful tool that inhibited the full participation of parent members at the Key Communicator meetings by emphasizing the values and beliefs of the principal.

In contrast, Valleyview parents were more successful in making their voices heard at the school council meetings. However, interview and observation evidence supported the notion that these parents were capable of placing considerable pressure on the principal with their demands. In fact, I felt that Mrs. Magee needed to manage parental involvement at the school council meetings because many of the parents were influential. Many had contacts on the school boards, were friends with elected government officials and some even shared social networks with other principals within the district. My impression from the school council meetings was that they were not reluctant to use their power to promote what they perceived to be in the best interests of their children.

Although higher income families appeared to be more vocal in expressing educational concerns at school council meetings, the lower income families of Central Park were not simply accepting of generic school council policy and, with the assistance of the principal, sought to alter the arrangement. In fact, the role of the principal as being primary emissary for involving parents in educational decision-making has been acknowledged by several research studies (Campbell, 1992; David, 1994; Watkins, 1990). This research indicates that the principal constitutes a powerful force in moulding and influencing parental involvement through their attitudes towards parents, articulation of core educational values, and willingness to work with parents.

The principals at both schools also faced distinct differences with regards to educational accountability. Within the Valleyview context, parents were very critical of the actions of both government personnel and the principal, Mrs. Steingard. At one school council meeting, they asked an educational trustee if she had brought along her chequebook to help solve what they perceived to be a gross underfunding of public education. As well, they asked an MLA if he would be willing to resign from his position if educational funding did not improve. In terms of their interactions with Mrs. Magee, many parents disapproved of her decision to alter Halloween celebrations and one parent even threatened to notify CBC Radio. Other instances involved parents voting to reject funding for the principal to attend a professional development activity, expressing considerable disdain for the placement of their children in split-classes, and some could not believe that the principal had not utilized their expertise in budgetary decision-making.

Parents at Central Park, on the other hand, expressed considerable confidence in the principal, Mrs. Steingard. At the Key Communicator meetings I attended, nobody questioned her about educational decisions and expressed an unconditional acceptance towards her views and aspirations for the school. This distinct contrast between accountability at both schools is advanced by Connell et al (1982) as reflecting the inorganic relationship that families of low social positioning have with their children's school. For example, the authors assert that working-class families, largely due to their personal experiences in the labour market, accept subordination from their superiors and that influences their beliefs about their children's schooling (p. 67). Could it be plausible to assume that the parents at Central Park lacked the cultural capital to engage confidently or assertively with Mrs. Steingard to be assured of their own ability to criticize the educational system?

Although the intensity and degree of parental participation varied at both schools, the evidence supported these research studies and suggested that the principals had the power to shape parental involvement activities according to their own personal beliefs and values. The principal at Valleyview had to exercise a considerable amount of power to set the tone for parental involvement and manage a number of tensions and dilemmas that arose. At Central Park, the principal utilized her power as an educational leader and balanced her own ideas about education such as the use of agendas with those of the parents to gain their trust. She demonstrated that she valued their opinions and realized that she had to follow the directives of the previous principal and reach out to parents in a capacity beyond the formality of a school council. Through the Key Communicator group, parents realized that the principal was willing to meet with them in an informal way, willing to spend time with them, and willing to listen to their concerns. However, there were considerably different styles of parental involvement between both locations.

Contrasting approaches and dynamics to parental involvement

Parental involvement in educational governance differed considerably at both Valleyview and Central Park. Valleyview parents demonstrated considerable assertiveness and some arrogance in challenging the school's authority and decisions. The focus of their school council meetings seemed to be on decision-making and they channelled their energies into political strategies that specifically questioned the actions of various educational stakeholders. Central Park, on the other hand, had different kinds of problems as many of these parents lacked both the skills and confidence to challenge the education their children were receiving at the school. While this research was being conducted, Central Park was in the stage of nurturing parental involvement through informal governance structures, emphasis on relationships and shared meals rather than decision-making and strategies, and was focussed on joint parent-child programs aimed specifically at helping children succeed in school.

Recalling Bourdieu and Passeron's (1977) theoretical contribution, the educational system fulfills relatively stable social functions: It plays a predominant role in cultural and social reproduction by inflating or deflating a person's initial cultural capital acquired from their family, and converting it into more or less valued credentials. The path to school success depended on familiarity with the school's specific knowledge, language, and standards of evaluation. This idea is also advanced by Griffith and Smith (2005) who raise questions about the social organization of inequality inherent in schooling. Believing that mothering work takes a variety of forms that encompass a wide range of possibilities for mothering in our society, the authors argue that this work is strongly shaped by and constitutive of social class. As a result, some working class mothers may be less familiar with the discourses of schooling and construct their children's education differently than those expected by the school. However, Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) also claim that schools have a degree of autonomy to influence the processes and outcomes of its production. Schools are responsible for conciliating between the dissemination of a common culture and respect for diverse individuals and cultures through democratic processes as much as possible.

At Central Park, parental involvement in educational governance represented a range of choices which greatly reduced the dependence of students' opportunities upon their relatively low social positioning in society. For example, Mrs. Sparks and Mrs. Steingard were committed to breaking the automatic conversion of low family social positioning into school failure. Instead, they developed and extended the Key Communicator group to capitalize on families' differentiated resources to diminish educational inequality.

Many parent involvement models identify participation in educational governance to be important (Epstein, 2001; Swap, 1993; Vincent, 1996). This research sets forth the notion that parents are motivated to participate in educational decision-making because they believe that they are helping their children and they believe that they have a responsibility of citizenship within schools. My research revealed that participating in educational governance made parents feel as though they were "insiders" being able to influence the quality of school experiences for their children, privy to privileged information, and inflated by the hubris of a better understanding of the daily struggles faced by school members.

Since Valleyview parents were more vocal in their demands about changes they wanted to see at the school, then principal, Mrs. Magee felt considerable pressure from the highly involved, influential parents. Her role at the school council meeting primarily involved managing parents. This was because the parents at Valleyview had contacts on school boards, shared social networks with the principal, and were not reluctant to use their power to promote what they viewed as their children's welfare. Under these circumstances, Mrs. Magee was required to continually stress to parents the school's responsibility to all children. As well, she assumed the central mission of teaching parents about the benefits of having schools in which all children succeed.

Parental involvement circumstances at Central Park were quite different than those at Valleyview. At Central Park, a feeling of openness was apparent in the conversations which occurred between the parents and principal. With the exception of the principal stipulating the use of an agenda at meetings and requesting that a different parent facilitate the role of Chair at every meeting, there was a strong feeling of confidence among parents that the school was meeting their children's needs and the parents felt reassured by the way they were greeted by the principal. As well, many parents indicated that they enjoyed the relaxed atmosphere of the

Key Communicator meetings and the meal served at the beginning of the meetings added to a friendly, mutually acceptable footing.

In trying to better understand the process of parental involvement at Central Park, Habermas (1976) made the distinction between communicative rationality and instrumental rationality. Communicative rationality referred to the use of reason to establish bonds between people and develop forms of interaction where people could live in respect with each other. Instrumental rationality involved the use of reason to establish objectives and goals, that was, rationality designed for a purpose that was at odds with establishing forms of community in schools. While I would not classify the school council meetings at Valleyview as engendering Habermas' (1976) conceptualization of instrumental rationality, I often felt that some parents were not afforded equal and open opportunities to participate in discussions. However, communicative rationality typically generated possibilities for home-school relations at Central Park whereby parents and the principal developed forms of parental involvement in school governance which they were both willing to take part in. Evidence from this study revealed that they naturally valued an atmosphere based on communication, informality, and openness. The next section examines the impact of gender in framing home-school relationships.

Gendered nature of parental involvement

When I began my research at both school sites, I found myself investigating an area of social practice whereby the majority of parental involvement activites were accomplished by women. This was quite interesting as many research studies profess a gender neutrality whereby no important distinctions had been made between men and women in their dealings with their children's school (Brown, 1996; Campbell, 1992; Rideout, 1995, Shaughnessy, 1996; Smylie, 1992). However, it is important to note that more recent literature acknowledges the predominant role of women in negotiating their children's educational experiences (David, 1993; David et al., 2003; Reay and Ball, 1998; Griffith and Smith, 2005). Without specific attention being given to gender, the differences between the roles assumed by men and women in terms of parental involvement were hidden. This study revealed that all parents did not share identical experiences of involvement in their children's education and highlighted inequalities between the sexes and between mothers themselves.

Writing extensively about the social reproductive nature of the educational system, Bourdieu (1996) discusses the practical and symbolic work undertaken by families whereby women were the key figures for maintaining relationships. For Bourdieu, the family was the site of social reproduction as it was both a habitus generating institution and an important site for the accumulation of cultural capital. For example, Bourdieu (1986) recognizes the pivotal role mothers play in the generation of cultural capital believing mothers' time was specifically harnessed to its acquisition.

Developing an understanding of cultural capital and habitus, Reay (1998) coined the term 'gendered habitus' to explain how the division of labour between men and women was seen as natural and whereby much of women's domestic labour was rendered invisible. In my study, the majority of Central Park women believed that they were primarily responsible for looking after their children and attending to their educational needs. Many accepted their partners' limited involvement and considered it to be inevitable. The significant division of labour between these women and their male partners was never problematized in the interviews and there appeared to be a general acceptance of men's marginality. This was very apparent in the Key Communicator group as all the sessions I attended consisted exclusively of women. Evidence revealed that many school activities which sought to enlist the support of parents were attended primarily by women. The language used by women in the interviews strongly indicated that parental involvement was their responsibility as they used "I" instead of "we" when discussing the frequency and types of parental involvement programs that they participated in.

While parental involvement in educational governance at Central Park was powerfully shaped by a gendered division of labour, the opposite was true for Valleyview. Although Mrs. Magee indicated that it was primarily women who volunteered at the school during the day helping with tasks such as photocopying materials for teachers, reading to children, and supervising field trips, there was a strong male presence on the school council. Several Valleyview men also expressed the belief that they had a responsibility to share in the role of volunteering at the school but said that their work obligations precluded them from spending time at the school during the day.

Within the sphere of parental involvement in education some research has highlighted the gendered nature of parental involvement in terms of both the practical and educational work involved (David, 1993; David et al., 2003; Reay, 1998; Griffith and Smith, 2005). From their viewpoint, it was possible to see parental involvement as women's work which positioned them as the parent who was either enhancing or holding back their children's educational progress. At both Valleyview and Central Park, there was a notable distinction with regard to the ways that men claimed to be involved in their children's education. For example, at Valleyview, men claimed that they considered it important to eat meals together as a family, assist their children with playing or working on a school project, reading to their children and helping them with homework, having private talks, and going on outings together. The men who were present during my interview with their wives at Central Park claimed that parenting was largely a woman's responsibility. Similarly, as Reay (1998) posits, women in her study fulfilled the major role of raising their children. Highlighting the gendered nature of parental involvement by discussing the absence of fathers' involvement in their children's education, she conceptualizes mothering as work and claims that the ungendered nature of parental involvement masks women's work.

This bears close proximity to Griffith and Smith's (2005) study that argues that the mothering discourse assigns to women the major role in the work of sustaining their children in school. The men interviewed in their study played a marginal role in the complementary educational work of the family, which included such things as helping with homework, taking their children to after-school activities, and reading to them at bedtime. Primarily because of their work schedules, men on the whole contributed little to the overall educational work done at home that complemented the work of the school. Similarly, at Central Park, men considered themselves to be the primary breadwinners for the family and it was the woman's responsibility to care for the holistic needs of the children. They saw their role as being a main source of support and protection to the family providing money to secure housing, food, and clothing, among other necessities. In contrast, because of their endowment with strong cultural capital, it could be argued that the men at Valleyview were in a better position because of their educational background and life experiences to engage with the white collar managerial practices promoted by school council legislation.

According to some research studies, lower rates of father involvement are characteristic of families with low income (Lambe et al., 1987; Parke, 1996; Goldscheider and Waite, 1991; Blaire, 1994; Nord, Brimhall, and West, 1997). This was primarily due to the fact that men possessing low income levels were the sole breadwinners for the family and had little time to spend with their children. As well, men devolved this responsibility onto their partners as they felt that it was a woman's obligation to attend to the care-giving functions of raising children. My study concurred with these findings and highlighted a substantial difference in the level of father involvement at both schools. Men from Valleyview appeared to be actively involved in school governance while those Central Park were uninvolved. Interview data also suggested that this was the case with regards to parental involvement in general as many low-income men do not participate in their children's education overall.

This section indicated that gender had a significant impact in shaping the tenor of parental participation in educational governance. As well, the social positioning of parents influenced the extent to which men were involved with their children's education.

School councils and democratic participation

So far, we have seen how the principal at Central Park attempting to create more voice actually reproduced deficits. As well, the micropolitics at Valleyview showed how parents went off into different directions and joined exclusive groups. Given these non-democratic consequences of parental involvement in educational governance, it is important to note that considerable research has given credence to the critical task of creating school environments that sustain the communication requirements of democratic communities (Apple and Beane, 1999; Fine, 1993; Leithwood, Jantzi, and Steinbach, 1999; Mintrolm, 2001; Miretzky, 2004; Nakagawa, 2000). Much of this research indicates that school councils develop well when educational stakeholders are clear about their roles and the goals of the school council, when parents are encouraged to become involved, and when there are opportunities for parents to obtain professional development regarding their participation. On the other hand, research suggests that parental involvement in educational governance carries implications that deserve careful examination. For example, the availability of time, knowledge, and collective power of parents to participate in meetings and the negative stereotypes attributed to parents who choose not to become involved may serve to inhibit democratic practice.

Although the principal at Central Park helped foster a collaborative working environment between parents at the Key Communicator meetings by providing them with a meal, acting as a primary source of information, and motivating the parents to become involved in their children's education, I did not believe that the meetings themselves were fully democratic. As outlined by various researchers, the term democracy encompasses a wide range of ideals which includes mutual respect, trust, non-discriminatory practices, and shared input into educational governance (Gutmann, 1987; Hahn, 1998; Mintrom, 2001). While I felt that Mrs. Steingard provided a consultative role on the Key Communicator group and encouraged parents to participate in a number of activities including storysacks, the EGGS Breakfast Club, and various fundraising initiatives, I share Gutmann's (1987) view that democracy has to do with participation which primarily entails active involvement. At Central Park, I felt that Mrs. Steingard's use of agendas to structure the Key Communicator meetings and her quest to involve a different parent at each meeting to serve as Chair was not democratic. In my interviews with parents, several indicated that they resented school councils because of this formalized structure. However, Mrs. Steingard seemed to be pushing the group in this direction and envisioned her role as one of shaping and moulding parents until they were capable of functioning as a "normal" school council.

As well, the make-up of the Key Communicator group at Central Park did not comprise a democratic representation of the school population. With visible minority students representing 65% of the Central Park population, only one Asian woman attended the Key Communicator meetings. There were no Aboriginal parent members present at the meetings despite the fact that 30% of the student population at Central Park were Aboriginal. This is significant because according to some literature, schools which do not obtain parents to participate in educational governance that are representative of the general school population seriously undermine democratic values (Gutmann, 1987, Leithwood, Jantzi, and Steinbach, 1999; Mintrom, 2001). This is primarily due to the fact that many minority ethnic families and families of low socio-economic status are often marginalized from schools as they must choose to be involved in the ways that the school dictates or else they will be construed as a problem (Fine, 1993; Nakagawa, 2000).

In a similar vein, the school council structure at Valleyview may be viewed as non-democratic. Through her involvement on the school council, Mrs. Magee undoubtedly played a dominant role serving as a source of information, providing leadership regarding the everyday processes of the school, helped construct the agenda, being a strong supporter of the council, and communicating with the broader parent population about school council activities. However, it is interesting to note that school councils within Alberta are given an advisory role only. While parental input on a host of educational issues are to be considered before a decision is made by the principal, the principal is ultimately responsible for accepting or rejecting the views of parents. Because of their advisory nature, school councils may profess a "mock" democracy whereby parents' suggestions and beliefs have the potential to be negated by bureaucratic rule. While this did not occur at Valleyview, the potential for such abuse exists should a principal not support the notion of parental involvement in educational governance.

If school councils are to have democratic meaning, educational policy has to place more trust in parental voice. An obvious vehicle for embedding democratic practice in schools is school councils, structures in which parents have the opportunity to exercise their rights and experience the democratic process first hand. Their existence in a school is a first step towards democracy. However, unless school councils have a more powerful role outside of being solely advisory, are representative of the entire parent population at the school, and are taken seriously by teachers and principals, it is unlikely that they will engender the idea of a democratic participatory framework.

Conclusion for the discussion

This discussion provided illuminating evidence regarding social positioning and patterns of parents' participation in schools. Specifically, it revealed the intricate dynamics of power which infused aspects of parental involvement such as the influence of the principal to shape interactions at school governance meetings and the contrasting styles of parental involvement at both schools. Despite the current pervasiveness of homogeneous notions of parent within governmental school council policy, this research has indicated that social positioning and gender create significant differences in terms of parental participation in schools which demand recognition and require reflexive consideration. This study also shows the micropolitics that exist within schools and that there are subtle power relations that get played out based on who's volunteering at the school every day. This is unfair since some parents, because of other commitments, are only able to be at the school at certain times.

Recommendations

This study has provided descriptions of parental involvement in school decision-making at two sites. In doing so, it endeavoured to explore the nature of parent-principal participation and relations at both schools. The major findings from both cases revealed the following set of information: (a) differences in social positioning impacted parental involvement in education with higher income families feeling more comfortable with formalized educational governance structures, (b) it appears as though higher income families adopted less rigid gender roles that working-class parents (although it must be noted that this study involved only two schools and a limited number of parents at each school: any generalizations about gender and class relations must be treated tentatively), (c) school councils, as they existed in legislation, were exclusionary, and (d) principals were key components in the implementation and management of educational decision-making structures.

These findings were a culmination of a wide range of parents' views on educational decision-making bodies. As well, parents talked about curricular concerns, about the social and emotional development of their children, and about how their own educational experiences as students shaped their present involvement with schools and teachers. The findings were also concerned with principals' views about their involvement at the school in educational decision-making and particularly with matters of consultation. These conclusions generated several recommendations that may assist in guiding future conversations and investigations in parental involvement research.

Recommendation #1 – There is no "one size fits all" approach to involving parents in educational governance. Policy legislation should recognize and promote alternate formats to "school councils".

As evidenced in this study, students came to school from families with diverse incomes. In the case of Valleyview, many of these families had economic advantages that facilitated educational experiences. Several Central Park parents, on the other hand, required considerable assistance from the school to participate in educational programs. Although Valleyview parents felt comfortable with the school council structure, Central Park parents found government legislation regarding school councils to be too formal. The various roles of Chair, co-Chair, Secretary, and Treasurer were unappealing to them as some indicated that the school council model would have given executive members more power than others.

Instead of following government legislation precisely and establishing a school council at Central Park, then principal, Mrs. Sparks, asked parents how they would like to be involved. The foundation of the Key Communicator group at Central Park began with parents coming to the school to make crafts with the principal and informally discussing events happening around the school. The next principal, Mrs. Steingard, decided to continue the Key Communicator tradition and shifted the main focus of the meeting from making crafts to discussing educational events taking place at the school and within the school district as a whole.

Some research studies have emphasized the importance of developing parental involvement policy collaboratively with parents instead of mandating forms of participation that parents are expected to follow. For example, in an attempt to understand the rationale behind why parents get involved in their children's education, Ramsburg (1998) concludes that parents' decisions were influenced by the belief that the school welcomed their involvement, for example by exhibiting welcoming signs at the school gate, using non-jargon words with parents, providing assistance to parents, and asking parents for their opinions and suggestions, and utilizing this information within the school context. Similarly, Davies, Palanki, and Burch (1993) designed action research teams comprised of teachers and parents that work together to improve the practice of partnerships in schools. The teams define problems or needs, identify ways to solve problems, design plans for interventions, and examine their results. This approach aimed at developing "teacher researchers" and "parent researchers" that worked together to improve partnerships with one another. Another model developed by Epstein and Connors (1995) incorporates an action team approach that involves establishing teams of teachers, administrators, parents, students, and members of the community to work for three years or more and assess the school's present practices of partnership, parent, teacher, and student needs, and desired practices.

As an impetus to provide better home-school relationships, a shared policy – such as the Key Communicator group at Central Park – jointly developed by the school and parents, responded to the diverse needs of a community. Involvement in educational governance should not be just for high income families, many of whom are formally educated, comfortable with role expectations, easy to reach, or able to come often to the school. Parental involvement in educational governance should include ideas proposed by families to promote active democratic participation.

In this study, school council policy was deemed to be restrictive and exclusionary as many low income parents indicated that they disliked its rigid structure. For these parents, school council policy would have denied them their freedom to be involved in educational governance on their own terms and in their own way. Fortunately, the principal intervened to help create an alternate program that parents felt confident in joining and was able to mobilize their support.

Recommendation #2 – Ensure principals are given adequate resources to help plan and organize educational governance meetings.

Considerable research suggests that decentralization reforms have resulted in a significant change in the roles of principal (Caldwell, 1994; Chapman and Boyd, 1986; Flinspach and Ryan, 1994; and Ford and Bennett, 1994). In addition to their expected role as educational leader in the school, they must interact with a larger number of constituents outside their school, convince staff that parents are valuable sources of information, and foster a collaborative culture encouraging parents and community members to help make decisions to support school improvement.

This study revealed that principals were of utmost importance in helping to promote parental involvement in educational governance. Both principals worked through their educational governance bodies to build connections with parents. For example, the principal at Valleyview used the school council as a medium to gauge parental satisfaction about various school events and solicit their input on several initiatives occurring within the school. At Central Park, the principal provided the Key Communicator members with a meal before the meeting began and frequently thanked the group for their involvement in various school-related functions. Both principals also articulated school goals throughout the meetings and communicated school plans with the various stakeholders. They provided ample opportunities for input into school decisions and supplied parents with multiple resources on learning activities to do at home with their children.

According to Sebring et al. (1995), principals are the single most important actors in promoting reform at the school level. This study confirmed the critical leadership role assumed by principals in establishing a collaborative relationship between the parent community and the school in order to spur new initiatives and discussions regarding the education of students. The results also suggested that both principals had to sometimes mediate conflicts that arose among parents and assist them in realizing that the school was primarily concerned with making decisions that were in the best interests of their children.

However, for principals to build collaborative relationships with parents, they need various resources to plan and organize educational governance activities. For example, both principals in this study indicated that they sometimes felt overburdened with coordinating educational governance activities and Mrs. Steingard felt that she needed more time to work with parents. Since working with parents was a primary goal of hers, she planned on enlisting the support of an Aboriginal worker to help increase Aboriginal parent participation in educational governance at the school. Mrs. Steingard believed that such a resource would be invaluable in ensuring that traditionally underrepresented groups had a voice in educational decisions being made at the school. When this study was completed, a decision had not been made regarding funding for this initiative at Central Park.

While equitable access to resources and programs is a necessity of a public education system, this study revealed that fundraising through educational decision-making bodies may create disparities between schools. For example, at Valleyview, school council members participated in a casino to raise an exorbitant amount of money for their school and had the monetary resources to take part in an art auction whereby parents placed bids on student art. This resulted in the school being able to afford extras such as an Artist-in-Residence program and a kiln. Although the previous principal at Central Park, Mrs. Sparks, was successful in securing considerable funds and programs for the school, had she not been so enthusiastic about personally changing the economic tone of the school, there would be significant disparities between Central Park and Valleyview. At Central Park, parents did not have the economic resources to help supplement their children's education as did those of Valleyview.

Given the disparity between both populations in terms of both the educational attainment and social positioning of parents, fundraising could possibly serve to enhance inequities between both sites. As no regulations currently exist limiting the amount of money that school fundraising bodies can accumulate, it seems plausible to either consolidate funds raised by these organizations and distribute them equally amongst all schools within the district or require schools to close their fundraising bank accounts with the aim of promoting equality between schools.

Further research is needed within the guise of this recommendation to determine how principals facilitate, enhance school development and improvement, promote parental involvement, create a collaborative culture at the school, involve parents in educational decision-making. With the increasing number of responsibilities being placed on school principals, further research is needed to investigate school restructuring in terms of new roles and responsibilities for staff members at the school that may ease the workload of the principal to foster a more collaborative decision-making approach.

Recommendation # 3 – Extend and diversify the policy mandate requiring all schools to have parents involved in educational governance.

My study has revealed that school council policy may have served to inhibit parental participation in educational governance among low income families. While further research is needed to determine if the same is true for those of high income who choose not to participate in educational decision-making, government policy should be extended to address the multiple ways in which parents can be involved in their children's education.

Research has shown that including families as participants in school decisions, governance, and advocacy activities through school councils may improve and extend discussions that lead to more inclusive and responsive decisions (Epstein, 2001; Johnson, 1993; Pepler, 1999; Reid, 1998; and Vincent, 2000). However, it is interesting to note that at the meetings I attended at both schools, only a few parents were present to voice their own beliefs. For example, on average, fourteen parents were present for the school council meetings at Valleyview. Given the fact that there were over 300 parents with students attending the school, many voices were absent from this forum. This indicated that the proceedings at the school council meetings at Valleyview were under no circumstances representative of the entire school parent body and several parents claimed that it was not possible to reach the larger parent population and solicit their views. The same was true for Central Park parents as on average, fifteen parents were present for the Key Communicator meetings and there were roughly 350 parents at the school. This suggested that the majority of parents at both schools were unable to participate in educational governance or simply did not want to serve on such committees.

As many parental voices were absent from the educational decision-making forums of both schools, it is possible that decisions made by these bodies may not be reflective of the overall parent population. To accommodate for parents who are unable to attend educational governance meetings during the evenings due to family issues, such as transportation, work schedules, childcare, a flexible schedule could be devised allowing other parents an equal opportunity to participate. As well, transportation could be provided for parents wishing to attend meetings and a babysitting service could be offered within the school. At Central Park, the principal was in the process of obtaining funding for an Aboriginal liaison worker in an attempt to encourage Aboriginal parent participation at the Key Communicator meeting and within the school as a whole. This may also serve as an impetus to increase parental engagement in educational governance among minority groups, where some literature documents a lack of involvement (Lareau and Horvat, 1999; Pena, 2000; Pepler, 1999).

Parental involvement, after all, is a vague term that can imply different things to different people. According to Ballantine (1999), there are many different aspects of parental involvement and concludes that it would be helpful if researchers would identify which aspects of parental involvement have the greatest benefit on children. Similarly, Grolnick, Benjet, Kurowski, and Apostoleris (1997) believe that once the academic community knows what parental involvement consists of, it can then predict what family attributes contribute most to producing parents that participate in their children's education. Right now, however, there is little agreement within the literature on which aspects of parental involvement contribute the most to student achievement. For example, Izzo et al. (1999), in a three-year study of 1200 urban elementary school children in New England found that parental engagement in home activities such as helping with homework had the strongest effect on student achievement. On the other hand, Catsambis (1998), using a large, long-term national database to examine the effects of Epstein's six types of parental involvement in a high school setting, found that student achievement stemmed from parents' actively encouraging their children to attend college and expressing high expectations for their children. Similarly, Downey (2002) posits that how parents interact with their children at home has a greater effect on school performance than how parents interact with school. For example, he recommends that programs developed to improve parental involvement in education need to focus on improving relationships between parents and their children in addition to those between parents and schools. As well, it is important to note that several studies indicate that no one particular type of involvement is best. Instead, a combination of various types of involvement was deemed to be the most effective in terms of student achievement (Epstein, 2001; Henderson, Berla, and Kerewersky, 1989; Moles, 1993; and Swap, 1987).

More research is needed regarding which aspects of parental involvement directly impact student achievement. Epstein (1995) delineates a framework illustrating the nature and diversity of six different types of parental involvement. These include: 1) parenting – providing housing, health, nutrition, and safety for the child, 2) communicating – school-home/home-school communication, 3) volunteering – in school help in classroom events, 4) helping at home – assisting with homework, 5) involvement in educational decision-making – being a member of a school council or other educational governance structure, and 6) collaborating with the community – bringing extra resources, programs, and services from the community to the school.

With these types of parental involvement in mind, some research documents the power relations that are implicit in the common conceptions of parental involvement. For example, Lareau (2000) argues that the term parental involvement as used by schools implied middle-class cultural capital that defined lower income parents as being deficient when they did not meet the school expectations. Another study by Kuntz (1998) refers explicitly to a contrast between resource and deficit understandings of parents. They claim that at some locations, poor mothers were classified as deficient and in need of training while others saw them as being entitled to having input into the shaping of various educational programs. Despite the seemingly good intentions of the principal at Central Park to involve parents at her school, I noticed that the types of activities parents were involved in addressed the deficiencies in parenting practices with respect to schooling. For example, by encouraging parents to participate in story sack activities, the principal hoped that this initiative would foster more reading at home. As well, Home and School Connection meetings served to provide parents with information on behavioural strategies they could use with their children, how to aid their children with homework, and information about what their children were learning in school. It is interesting to note that none of these topics were ever discussed at meetings I attended at Valleyview. With respect to the different ways parents can become involved in school, it could be argued that Central Park unintentionally reproduced the idea of the low-income family as deficient and in need of guidance.

Given the various ways in which parents can become involved in the education of their children, it is interesting to note that government legislation mandates one form of involvement: school councils. Due to the shortage of research linking school councils to student achievement, it is plausible to believe that other forms of parental engagement may be equally, if not more important. This overbearing emphasis on educational governance, in my opinion, detracts from an exploration of the multiple ways in which parents can be involved.

Conclusion

A sizeable body of research confirms that parental involvement has a powerful influence on children's achievement in school (Barbour & Barbour, 1997; Epstein, 2001; Ho & Willms, 1996, Lareau, 2000; and Vincent, 2000). When families are involved in their children's education, children earn higher grades and receive higher scores on tests, attend school more regularly, complete more homework, demonstrate more positive attitudes and behaviours, graduate from high school at higher rates, and are more likely to enrol in higher education than students with less involved families. For these reasons, increasing parental involvement in the education of their children has been an important goal for all schools. In fact, the widespread appeal and perceived value of parental involvement has been reflected in school council legislation across every province and territory in Canada.

This study has provided detailed descriptions of parental involvement in school decision-making at two sites. In doing so, it endeavoured to explore the nature of parent-principal participation and relations at both schools. One of the most significant findings of this work points to a disjuncture between the political framing of parental involvement in education in policy and the everyday activities and interests of parents involved in their children's education. If parents do not wish to comply with the Alberta Government directive and become involved in school councils, schools will not become more closely in touch with their community and opportunities to facilitate more opportunities for involving parents in their children's education may be missed. As Peterson-del Mar (1994) posits, "The mere presence of a school site council means very little. Only the committed and skilful participation of the school community can breathe life into its form" (p.2).

While other studies have looked at the impact of social positioning and gender on parental participation, this research emphasizes the need to focus efforts to engage parents in developing trusting and respectful relationships with the school. For example, as evidenced in this research, the communities served by both schools were very diverse in terms of class, ethnicity, and culture. The case studies reveal that principals should make every attempt to learn about the concerns of the families and how they define and perceive their role in the school. Any attempt to form collaborations among principals and parents must start with the school attempting to build relationships of respect which are intentional and consistent.

To create a welcoming environment for parents, one that enlists their support in helping their children achieve, schools sometimes adopt changes that make them more personal and inviting spaces. This was evidenced at Central Park where the principal provided parents with a meal prior to the beginning of the Key Communicator meeting and even altered the meeting structure to make it more accommodating to parental demands. To include more parents and to deal with some of the factors influencing parents, school personnel must consider the educational level, language, culture, and social positioning of the parents. Whatever steps that schools take to develop close partnerships with families on behalf of students' learning, schools that are more successful are prepared to reconsider educational policy initiatives that prescribe an established way of doing business and to restructure in ways that will make them less hierarchical, more personal, and more accessible to parents.

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Appendix A **Parent interview guide**

Thank you very much for taking the time to help me out with my study. I really appreciate that and please make yourself comfortable and relax. The purpose of this interview is for me to learn from your experiences and explore the nature of your participation in educational governance. I also want to let you know that your participation in this study is strictly confidential. At no point will your name be used in the study and I am the only researcher involved. So, with that being said, I encourage you to speak freely and openly.

1. I'd like to learn a little about your background.
a. How many children do you have at this school now?
b. What grades are they in?
c. Your educational background? High school? Post-secondary?
d. Do you currently work? Where?
e. Are you currently married/divorced?
f. What are your feelings about this school? Can you give me some examples to support your views?
g. What types of things go on at the school to involve parents? What is your school's Instructional Focus? Is it meaningful to you?
h. Why do you send your kids to this school?
i. How long have you been involved in educational governance?

2. How do you feel about the educational governance meetings? Are they useful to you? What do you get out of them?

3. Before you became involved in educational governance, how would you describe your relationship with the teachers and the principal? Has being part of this group changed anything for you? Has anything changed at the school because of this group?

4. Do teachers ever participate in the governance meetings? Have they ever attended meetings? Why do you think this is so? Would you like to see them become more involved in the meetings? What kinds of feelings do you get from the teachers when you go to the school? (Is it welcoming?)

5. Looking back, why did you choose to become involved in educational governance? Can you describe to me your understanding of why there was this big push to involve parents in educational governance?

6. Has the experience been what you expected? Can you tell me about a really good experience? A bad experience? Is there anything that you would change/add regarding your group? What do you see as your role?

7. What would you say is the purpose of your involvement in educational governance? Do you consider it to be effective? What makes it effective or what could make it more effective?

8. Do you find that some people on the parent group have more power than others?

9. What are your thoughts on having an agenda for the meetings? Have you ever had the opportunity to make up an agenda?

10. As a member of the group, what are your thoughts on the "advisory role" you currently have?

11. Can you tell me about any training that you received to support your role as a parent member? Who provided the training? Where? Was it good/bad?

12. How would you describe your relationship with the principal? What comes to mind when you think of the principal?

13. Have there ever been any conflicts that you see between people during the parent meetings? How were these fixed?

14. Are there certain areas that you would like to see the parent group become more involved in?

15. What sorts of things do you like to do at meetings? Could you share with me your thoughts on fundraising? What things do you do for fundraising?

16. As a parent, in what other ways are you involved in your child's education? Besides educational governance. What do you enjoy doing with your child? How would you rank these activities as compared with your attendance at the meetings? Are they more important, equally important, less important?

17. What are your thoughts on the decisions made at the parent meetings? What about those parents who do not have a voice at the meetings? Why do you think that is so? Is this something that you have ever thought about before? Is the parent group doing anything to reach those parents?

18. I've noticed many women at the meetings. Why do you suppose that is?

19. In terms of your child's learning, do you feel that your attendance at the parent meetings affects this in any way? Can you give me some examples of things that you have done that may have had an impact on this?

20. How would you describe your own school days? Were your parents as involved in your education as you are in your own child's education? Why do you suppose that is?

21. Where would your school be without the parent group?

22. Are there any additional comments that you have that would help me better understand your experiences?

Appendix B **Principal interview guide**

Thank you very much for taking the time to help me out with my study. I really appreciate that and please make yourself comfortable and relax. The purpose of this interview is for me to learn from your experiences as a principal and explore the nature of your participation in educational governance. I also want to let you know that your participation in this study is strictly confidential. At no point will your name be used in the study and I am the only researcher involved. So, with that being said, I encourage you to speak freely and openly.

1. I'd like to learn a little about your background and that of the school.

a. Why did you choose to become involved in education?

b. How many years have you been a teacher/principal?

c. Your educational background? Years spent in university? Which universities you attended?

d. Do you enjoy being a principal? Can you give me some examples of your likes/dislikes?

e. How many children currently attend the school? Can you provide me with an ethnic background/ summary of the students that attend school? Average class size? Is there anything special going on at the school that makes it distinct from other schools?

f. What types of things go on at the school to involve parents? Breakfast club? Artist in residence program? Bennett Centre? What is the Instructional Focus?

g. What are your feelings about this school? Can you give me some examples to support your views? Are there any challenges specific to the school?

h. How long has parental involvement in educational governance been in place at the school? Can you share with me some of the history? Did it exist before you were a principal here?

i. How long have you been involved on this parent group?

2. Have you ever considered serving a meal before the parent meeting or snacks?

3. What about the parent group itself? In your opinion, is this useful? How do you think parents feel about the meetings?

4. Before school councils came into existence, how would you describe the relationships you had with parents? How do you think things have changed with the introduction of school councils?

5. Looking back, why did you choose to become involved in this group? Can you describe to me your understanding of how school councils came into being in Alberta?

6. Has the experience been what you expected? Can you tell me about a really good experience? A bad experience? Is there anything that you would change/add regarding this group?

7. What would you say is the purpose of parental involvement in educational governance? Do you consider it to be effective? What makes it effective or what could make it more effective? Can you think of a key factor in the successful operation of the parent group?

8. Do you find that some people on the parent group have more power than others?

9. How about teacher members on the group? What feelings do you get from staff regarding the parent group? What feelings do you get from staff regarding parental involvement in general? Do they seem to talk more or feel happier with some types of involvement over others?

10. As a principal, have there been any changes at the school that have resulted from the initiation of school councils into the system? How much have things changed? Can you give me some examples?

11. What are your thoughts on having an agenda for the parent meeting? Who develops the agenda? How much input do others have into developing the agenda?

12. As a principal, what are your thoughts on the "advisory role" that parent members currently have? Do you believe that there are things parents should/should not have a say in (or have a greater voice in) when it comes to education? (Personnel, curriculum, budgeting)??? In what ways do you feel that you guide the group? How do you feel about having ultimate decision-making authority? One theme that emerged from the interviews I conducted was that the principal is essential to the parent group meetings. How do you feel about that?

13. What do you see as your role on the parent group? Can you tell me about any training that you received to support your role? Who provided the training? Where?

14. How would you describe your relationship with the parents at the meetings?

15. What sorts of things do you do at meetings? Has there been an incident where the group has not been able to arrive at a consensus? How do you arrive at making decisions? Do people vote to reach a consensus?

16. Have any conflicts ever emerged between members? How was this resolved/handled?

17. Are there areas where you would like to see the group get more involved in?

18. Could you share with me your thoughts on fundraising?

19. As a principal, in what other ways do you see parents involved in their child's education around the school? Besides the parent meetings. How would you rank these activities as compared with their attendance at the parent meetings? Do you think that other types of involvement are more important, equally important, less important? What goes on at the school in terms of volunteering?

20. What are your thoughts on the decisions made by the parent group? The governance group at the school consists of approximately 10-15 individuals. What about those parents who do not have a voice on the parent group? Why do you think that is so? Is this something that you have ever considered before? Do you feel that this parent group is representative of the overall parent body at the school? In what ways are the broader community encouraged to participate in the school?

21. I've noticed that there are many women at the meetings. Why do you suppose that is?

22. In terms of a child's academic growth, do you feel that the parent group influences this in any way? Can you give me some examples of things that the group has done that may have had an impact on this?

23. How would you describe your own school days? Were your parents involved in your education?

24. Where would the school be without a parental involvement in educational governance?

25. Are there any additional comments that would help me better understand your experiences?